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# THE LITTLE MADELEINE

*Books by Mrs. Robert Henry*

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# THE LITTLE MADELEINE

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF  
A YOUNG GIRL IN MONTMARTRE

by

MRS. ROBERT HENREY



E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY, INC.

New York, 1953

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This is the story of my girlhood.  
No fact has been altered.  
Each character bears his, or her, own name.



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## THE LITTLE MADELEINE





# I



WAS born on 13th August 1906 in Montmartre in a steep cobbled street of leaning houses, slate-coloured and old, under the shining loftiness of the Sacré-Cœur. Matilda, my mother, describing to me later this uncommodious but picturesque corner which we left soon after my birth, stressed the curious characters from the Auvergne and from Brittany who kept modest cafés with zinc bars. Behind these they toiled, storing in dark courtyards or in windowless rooms coal, charcoal, and firewood dipped in resin, which the inhabitants of our street, who never had any money to spare, bought in the smallest quantities such as a pailful at a time. The Auvergnat traders in particular formed a clan of their own, each knowing from which village the others came, all speaking patois, and so unaccustomed to French that they mangled it when speaking and could only write their names.

The woman who owned the café over which we lived had a sister called Mme Gaillard, a fine-looking person who had come from the rockiness of her native village to Paris to sell lace. Her stock-in-trade consisted of a large red umbrella with a cherry-wood handle rubbed to a shine, and two chests opening out fanways on leather hinges which she placed on a deal table supported by trestles. These contained the more valuable stock such as laced table linen, curtains, and lace blouses. The red umbrella, opened out and placed point downwards, formed a recipient for cheaper laces sold by the yard, or made-up articles which, whilst inexpensive, attracted knowledgeable customers by the excellence of their quality.

My father would take his aperitif every day at the café downstairs, and buy his litre of red wine for the table, my mother going there for a pail of coal or a bag of charcoal. When my mother was expecting my baby brother and was too advanced in pregnancy to fetch the piece goods on which she sewed buttons and

press-studs at home, Mme Gaillard, being at the café with her sister, the owner, offered to teach Matilda how to work lace, an art in which few were expert. My mother accepted. She was a genius with the needle, as others are, born with minds rich in melody or with eyes receptive to colour, and her fingers took naturally to the softness and prettiness of lace. She started with window curtains and house linen. Then, carried forward on wings of creation, put together her first lace blouse, which was immediately sold by Mme Gaillard to a wealthy South American woman. Mme Gaillard now gave my mother Valenciennes laces of increasing beauty which were turned into blouses as fine as spiders' webs. Unfortunately, alone in her room, bending over her work, she earned hardly anything. In winter she was cold. In summer, the sun beating on the adjoining roofs sent red-hot reverberations of lead and zinc through the attic window.

Her days passed slowly. From time to time neighbours from the Auvergne or from Lombardy quarrelled in the courtyard. A street singer with a baby in her shawl sang a romance, but before it was finished the *concierge* would come out and noisily chase her away with a broom.

My mother had a sister called Marie-Thérèse with whom she was brought up at Blois where my aunt was seduced by a young soldier who looked very fine dancing the polka and the mazurka in his gaudy uniform. The regiment crossed the Loire behind flaming torches every Sunday evening so that the population could dance in the main square to the sound of a brass band. Marie-Thérèse and her soldier had loved each other passionately for a while, but when Marie-Thérèse was pregnant the soldier disappeared.

My aunt ran away to Paris where my mother was already married to my father and was living with him in Montmartre. As they were so poor and my mother was expecting my baby brother I had been sent to a foster-mother at Soissons. Marie-Thérèse was not able to find work when she arrived, her pregnancy being too visible, and she therefore knocked at my mother's door asking for hospitality.

She was pretty but irresponsible. Her dream was to make hats. She was later to show a real gift for this, but the sort of work my mother did, mounting lace, was too finicky for my aunt, who passed a good deal of her time dreaming and cutting out the

romantic serials from the daily papers, which she eagerly discussed with anybody who would listen to her. Her tireless chattering rather fatigued my mother who was serious and taciturn and just now wondering how she would manage to make ends meet after the birth of her second child.

Within a week Marie-Thérèse knew everybody in Montmartre. It did not even seem to matter to her that the Italians and the people from the Auvergne spoke hardly three words of French. She was soon on the best of terms with all the parlourmaids and cooks who borrowed her serials which she kept locked in a barded trunk. Nobody was so happily unconscious of her responsibilities. The expected child, the fact she had no home, not a room, not a lodging of any kind, did not matter to her. She was not even put out by the tumultuous scenes of my violent father who could not stand seeing her lolling about his one-roomed flat.

Towards Easter Marie-Thérèse, who could not remember how long she had been pregnant and who had never consulted a midwife or a doctor, was taken with pains. She thought they were due to indigestion, but my mother who was less sentimental and more worldly wise had no doubt her sister was starting her labour.

Drenching spring rain had been falling since morning and now the ground was so wet that my father had been sent home from work. He was laying bricks, and when the weather was bad the workmen were dismissed without pay till the sun came out again. When the men came home early in the morning they annoyed their wives by sitting around doing nothing, and so they preferred to stay amongst themselves, playing cards in a café. At night they arrived drunk and penniless. On this particular day my father had come straight home. He was sitting on a kitchen chair with a plank across his knees mending his hobnailed boots. Marie-Thérèse moaned and writhed as she turned the pages of her serial. Matilda, in front of a small table, her feet on a stool, her work pinned to her bosom, was passing her needle with ever-increasing speed through the lace of a blouse, as if trying to compensate for the two idle people in the room. Her thin lips were sarcastically closed, for she was losing patience with her sister's airy nonchalance. My mother had no illusions about her own future, but she discussed it with nobody, for she was timid.

My mother listened to my father knocking nails into his boot. She was aware that in an hour or two he would feel thirsty and go to the café. Her sister's moaning put her nerves on edge. She was angrily puzzled that Marie-Thérèse had become so popular in the cobbled streets of Montmartre along which, in spite of her pregnancy, she tripped so carelessly, amusing the neighbours, helping them with a smile, recounting to each what the other did, and prodigiously interested in the unhappy things that happened to a great number of unimportant young women. Marie-Thérèse was by definition an onlooker. Her immense pity for others was never lessened by any consideration for herself. When, tearfully, she brought back news of some seduced servant girl, Matilda would remark scathingly: 'Why is she any worse off than you?'

'Oh, but it's not the same thing!' cried Marie-Thérèse. 'She hasn't a home or a penny in the world!'

My mother turned her head angrily. Marie-Thérèse was as naturally happy as my mother was, by experience and outlook, sad. If ever my aunt thought about herself it was in the light of a story-book heroine who, though having a spot of bad luck in the current chapter, would eventually, towards the end of the book, marry an earl for love. Matilda had no doubt that the morrow would be just as melancholy, if not more melancholy, than the other days. Was she not married to a man whose fate was to be always poor? Had she not a baby girl whose foster-mother kept on sending the bill? And how would she manage when the second child was born? Paris, beyond the slate roofs of Montmartre, glittered at the feet of happy Marie-Thérèse. Matilda saw no romance in it.

Marie-Thérèse continued to twist in her chair and suddenly the book fell on the floor. Seeing this, my mother lay the exquisite piece of tulle and lace on the small table, took off her thimble, unfastened the pins from her dress, and looked at her husband. Émile put down his hammer and taking his coat off a peg went to fetch a hackney coach. My mother made a bundle of what she supposed her sister would need in hospital and silently waited. They were not quite ready to have a good cry and make it up. My father came up the stairs and asked my aunt if she was ready. Hurt and puzzled, she looked at my mother, her eyes filling with tears. My mother gave a gulp and cried too. They flung

themselves passionately into each other's arms and wept, and my father had some trouble in pulling my aunt away and leading her down to the waiting cab.

The matron of the Lariboisière, a thin bleak woman, who knew my father, having seen him prowling and anxious at the time of my birth, asked why he had not warned her at least a day in advance. She might have found a spare bed. As it was the hospital was full and Marie-Thérèse would have to go to the annexe. This would take them five minutes in a cab.

My father and a nurse helped Marie-Thérèse down the stone stairs. The hackney coach had gone, my father having paid it off as soon as he could. They would now have to wait till one passed along the street. The rain was still coming down hard, sheeting the pavements with steaming water which flowed turbulently along gutters. The first gaslights were going up outside buildings and in shops. There was a sudden cry, piercing, frightened, a muffled fall and skid on the wet asphalt, a streak of blood, and Marie-Thérèse, losing her blood, swooned in my father's wiry arms. The nurse, quickly bending, picked up from the pavement the ball of flesh, laying it tenderly in her upheld blue overall. The party returned now, commanding attention, to the busy hall where the matron gave orders to set up a camp bed. Gently taking from the nurse's blue apron the shapeless parcel, she said to my father 'It's a girl!' and quickly tied round the tiny wrist a ribbon with the number.

Émile hurried home to tell his wife the exciting news. The next day my mother went to hospital where she found her sister pale and weak and the baby so lifeless that she wondered if it would live. Marie-Thérèse had already built a dream future for her daughter who was to be called Rolande after the heroine of her latest serial.

My aunt remained nine days in hospital after which she bravely walked out through the gates, her baby against her breast, clutching a package with the layette given to each mother—swaddling bands, nappies, a brassière, and a small pink cloak. Rolande was sent to a foster-mother near Soissons where I was. Marie-Thérèse succeeded in finding a job, but my father, with this bad weather, spent most days at the café playing cards with his friends.

## 2

I N the sunniest part of the *midi*, among the vines, the olive-trees, the high-pitched cicadas, the blood-red tomatoes, and the poems of Mistral, there is a village called the Grand' Combe where men dig for coal. Here was my father born. The inhabitants are, on the whole, religious and law-abiding, but their tempers smoulder like volcanoes and are always ready to burst into flame. Wars of religion had once raged furiously. Catholics and Protestants massacred each other, and their bones now lie under rocky, parched earth. Though men of my father's time were placid and jovial when resting under their vine trellises, in the cool of the evening they would fight suddenly in the village because of a word construed as injurious to wife or daughter. A word was not even necessary. A look was sufficient or that smacking of the lips by which a man in the *midi* shows his appreciation of a pretty face, for is not appreciation tantamount to coveting? The honour of the family is carried high. Enthusiasm boils over also during political arguments, and at the time my father was growing up the first trade unions were cautiously taking shape in this district where underground, far below the warm sun and the sound of the thrush, the entire male population worked from dawn till evening.

My father was an only son and much cherished. Grandfathers, fathers, sons, are little gods in the *midi*, and my father's family, the Gals, the cocks, were well named. Fine-looking and proud, but appallingly quarrelsome, they strutted through life. Émile's father was an inspector in the mines who often took his son, quite little, into the long dark galleries where the boy learnt to crawl under the seams and advance, like a snake on his back, wriggling into places where nobody else could go. On his eleventh birthday he asked to work underground with the men, and his parents, proud of his strength and courage, gave him their blessing. His older companions praised him because he

could so easily have had a soft time at school and he, to show off a little, tried to match his output against that of the grown men, with the result that they began to treat him as one of themselves, patting him on the back and inviting him to drink with them. 'When you work like a man,' they said, 'you mustn't drink like a woman.' So they offered him absinthe, so cool to the lips, so cheap and easy to drink—the blue, the green, the *mominette*, pretty, tender appellations to hide the most virulent of poisons.

Life for Émile was an enchantment. Fortune seemed anxious to show her favours. When he reached call-up age he drew a lucky number which cut down his term of service to one year, and he was sent to Nice in the cavalry where, because his limbs had grown strong and supple in the mine, he learned to ride quicker than any of his draft. He was immediately posted to the private guard which the French Government gave Queen Victoria when, that winter, she went to Nice. Magnificent in his uniform, his pockets full of gold pieces sent by his proud parents to their brave 'Milou,' every young woman falling in love with him, but he merely casting quick glances at them, as admired by his new companions as he had been by those in the coal seams, the weeks passed joyously. Then suddenly a telegram informed him that his father and mother, his grandfather and grandmother, and a sister had died in appalling agony in the course of one night after eating a dish of poisoned mushrooms. An elder sister alone survived, for, being pregnant, she had never stopped being sick. Émile went sadly to live with this sister whose name was Augustine. Her husband, Ernest Agnel, which is patois for 'a lamb,' a man of infinite kindness and tenacity, worked in the mine. In the evenings Émile, unwilling to thrust himself on his sister's home life, went to the café. He was the last remaining Gal and, without doubt, the most aggressive.

The need for companionship, to feel in the centre of things, tempted him to join the clandestine meetings where burly fellows, having known him since he was a lad, put their big hands affectionately on his shoulder, saying: 'You, Milou, you are afraid of nothing! Tell the bosses what we think!' These words made him feel very proud, and he became more than ever anxious to live up to his reputation, to accomplish something for which these men whom he admired would be grateful, perhaps even choosing him as their leader. Nobody yet dared to ask openly for



better conditions in the mine. What they wanted were simple things, long overdue. But they were still, like children, afraid, their banding together not yet having an official character. The less scrupulous recognized in this young orphan, ardent and quick with his tongue, a tool whom they could push into making rash demands, arguing that if things turned out badly they would slink away, pretending not to know him, waiting for another opportunity to achieve their ends. Milou was young. He had no parents to shame, no family to support. If the owners dismissed him he still had all the world at his feet. It was not, therefore, being so very unscrupulous, thought these men, to make use of his fiery ardour. They were not without admiration for his physical strength, his exploits in the cavalry, guarding the Queen of England, speaking both patois and French, and having, which I forgot to tell you, several generations back, a school-master and a beadle in his family.

Augustine's husband, M. Agnel, merely dreamt of a comfortable old age. He was not the man to start troubles with the owners. Besides, he was starting to put a little money aside, and just as a lamb grazes contentedly on the same piece of grass day in day out, the lamb that was M. Agnel scratched uncomplainingly the coal from the bowels of this sun-drenched earth, happy, when his day's work was finished, to wash himself clean and smoke a pipe under the cool vine trellis of his own cottage. He was, of course, the last person in the village to discover the sort of name his young brother-in-law was making for himself, and it was not therefore until most of the harm was done that he learnt the truth by the ironical reflections of his friends. After much heart-searching M. Agnel resolved to talk to Émile strongly, fortifying himself for this unpleasant task by reflecting that he was older and already the mainstay of a family. The young Gal resented the Agnel's intervention and became so aggressive in manner that the lamb feared for the safety of his person. Soon everybody in the village whispered that the owners had scribbled the words: 'Hothead and agitator' against Émile's name on the card index at the mine offices. M. Agnel became increasingly perturbed for the good name of his family and his own future in the mine, but this time, instead of upbraiding his brother-in-law, he confided in his wife the necessity to turn Milou's thoughts in the direction of matrimony, certain that love

would damp the young man's political ardour; but though they both reviewed in Milou's hearing all the prettiest girls of marriageable age, Émile, being ambitious, was not to be influenced. As his zeal grew the marginal notes against his name took on a more ugly meaning, two of them, 'carboniarist' and 'anarchist,' being of a nature to alarm the police who detailed detectives to follow the unsuspecting Émile as he walked airily down the street.

Now it was too late to arrange matters, even by a marriage. Milou, seeing his friends turn their heads away when he walked into a café, lost his assurance. The cicadas sung to no avail. The sun merely warms those who are happy. One evening M. Agnel and his wife, using circumventions and stratagems, asked Milou to leave their house. And not only their house, but the village, and indeed the entire department of the Gard where his presence was everywhere suspect to the authorities. 'Think, my dear Milou,' said M. Agnel softly, 'how agreeable for a young man of your age to see something of the world, to spend a few weeks in Paris, exploring the many angles of the capital. Consider the fine people you would meet, you who have seen Queen Victoria at Nice and all those smart folks who gamble at Monte Carlo! Come, my little Milou, Augustine shall prepare your things, not forgetting the fine socks your poor mama knitted you before she died, and I warrant they will give you a grand air among the smart young men you'll soon be rubbing shoulders with!' Then kissing him, for she loved him still, Augustine would say: 'You'll make them gape, my fine Milou, when you arrive in Paris!'

The unfortunate innocent prepared to leave for ever carefree days in the hot sun, the shade of the vine, the comfort of being loved by those who had known him from childhood and remembered his parents, and could speak to him of his grandfather who taught in the school and wore the uniform of a beadle. Old women with wrinkled faces would not stop him to recount the brave deeds of even more distant Gals, adding with fervour: 'But you, little Milou, will be the strongest and bravest of all!' He would no longer watch on Sundays the entire village outside the church waiting to go in, hear the bells ring, and laugh when sly husbands under the great portals gave the slip to their wives, to run off, guilty as schoolboys, to other husbands waiting under

the cool trees, winking, taking off their too warm clothes smelling of moth balls, saying with a nod in the direction of the church:

‘Good enough for females, that’s what I say!’

Milou, who was not one for mass, would watch them go arm in arm to the café, perhaps swagger up and join them for the fun of being patted on the back:

‘Hallo, Milou, how about a game of billiards?’

Then an hour later, when the bells clanged out again, male voices would call out:

‘Waiter! The bill quickly!’

Coats would be put on, and the guilty ones would edge into the church where, innocently, they would wait for their wives, pretending they had been there all the time. Some wives, of course, guessed, but the younger ones took a long time to discover the stratagem, not willing to believe their dark eyes could not chain up their husbands even at mass. Church parade was a fine thing under the hot *midi* sky, the women unaccustomed to their large hats, their noses white with powder they never used on weekdays, their white canvas shoes whitened specially, leaving powdery marks along the hems of their long skirts, thinking gluttonously of the cream cakes and strawberry tarts they would eat at the pastry-cook’s where all the smartest people went after church. The husbands nudged each other again, not liking these sugary things that were female food. Men were men. Whilst the women stood in front of the counter to eat their cakes, their little fingers held on high, yapping, thrusting their faces under other hats to kiss their friends, the men went off to have an absinthe, perhaps two, before lunch. Milou in Paris, Milou banished, would think nostalgically of the Sunday lunch, invariably the same, rabbit, wild rabbit, steaming in a bubbling sauce of claret, garlic, and thyme. Then, in the cool of the evening, a game of bowls under the chestnut-trees in flower.

That was the *midi*, the native soil.

Milou took the evening train, the slow one that had third-class coaches of hard wood and that rumbled smokily on its long journey through the night. He carried a bundle containing his clothes, and a basket with some bottles of wine from the family cellar and a good satisfying meal prepared by Augustine and wrapped up in a linen napkin, and when he had eaten and drunk he turned his back on his fellow passengers and slept.

With daylight quite a new landscape stretched before his eyes, flat and unbelievably grey. He stared at monotonous cornfields for a long time in anxious surprise, then, suddenly, the thought having struck him that he might have taken the wrong train or gone past Paris without knowing it, he put on his straw hat, opened the window, and looked out. The telegraph poles rushed past, the cool air fanned his cheeks, a speck of dust lodged itself in an eye, and his straw hat blew off. Milou turned round furiously, bumping his head against the top of the window. He was convinced that one of his fellow passengers had knocked his straw hat off as a joke, and he was not a man to appreciate any joke that affected his dignity. He woke up the passenger nearest him, insulting him in patois, and when his anger was spent he scowled round the compartment and went to sleep again.

At last, late in the morning, after passing through miles of suburbs, the train steamed into Paris. He was obliged to make his first appearance in the capital without a hat which, in those days, would make people look at him. He said to himself: 'They 'll think I 've been following a funeral procession.' He clutched his bundle and stepped out on the platform, mixing with the crowd of passengers hurrying along in the direction of the barrier. Here two gentlemen stopped him asking to see his papers. They read the details, and looked him up and down. 'Tall, fair, blue eyes, grey suit, straw hat. . . . What have you done with the straw hat?' asked one of the plain-clothes men with scant politeness.

'I looked out of the window and it blew away,' said Émile.

The detective laughed sarcastically: 'It 'll cool you down, you hothead!' he answered.

## 3

WHEN Émile had walked out of the station he stood still a moment, listening to the noise of Paris, wondering in what direction to go. Then, reflecting that he would be as well here as anywhere else, he crossed the street and took a room in the first lodging place whose modest sign met his eye. He was quick to make friends, and within a few days came up against a man who had served in his regiment. This man, from the *midi* like Émile, had been for some years in Paris where he worked as night porter in a luxury hotel. Milou, in the days of his splendour, guarding Queen Victoria at Nice, had been kind to him and now Jean Bonhomme was surprised to find the once swaggering cavalryman so timid and worried in the big city.

Bonhomme slept every day till lunch, after which he would take an airing in the streets till it was time for him to go to work. He invited Émile to a meal, suggesting that the next morning he should go to see the manager of the hotel where he worked who might find him something to do. Émile followed his friend's advice and was immediately engaged to polish the parquet floors, for Paris was just then preparing to welcome distinguished guests for a great exhibition.

Polishing floors proved even harder than the mine. He had to rub steel mesh over the surface of the wood, and then polish rooms and stairs and corridors, continually breathing minute particles of dust. He would become very hot and then be thrown into a bitter draught when called upon hurriedly to give a hand to the luggage porters. And yet Émile was never tired and when Bonhomme, who was not strong, needed help, Milou would stay with him a great part of the night.

He was gay and earned a lot of money. The luck of his boyhood and soldiering days had come back, and whenever he played cards he invariably won. There was one café he favoured particularly for a game of whist. The place was owned by a rich

widow, rather a fine woman in her way, who was looking forward to taking life more easily in her native village in the *midi*. She liked to talk about the good things waiting for her in the sunshine, the big house with the vine growing against it, the linen and solid furniture, especially the beds with the wool mattresses and, of course, the regular dividends from well-chosen investments which were always necessary when one did not want to worry about the future. She only needed one thing to complete her happiness, and that was a husband, her first, an Auvergnat, having died from the strain of building up this fine Paris café of which she was now the owner.

She decided that Émile was her man and she set about giving him a foretaste of what their married happiness would be. Émile enjoyed Juliette's hospitality and liked to feel that she was always there, behind her cash-desk, important, dignified, showing to advantage a large, heaving bosom and a fine head of dark hair constellated by *diamanté* combs which shone like glow-worms. She had a court of admirers who formed too valuable an adjunct to her establishment to allow any of them altogether to despair of obtaining her hand, but now that Émile was her chosen one she used the others mostly to show off her gifts of repartee, that Émile should realize what a fortunate young man he was to have won the heart of such an accomplished lady. But Émile hesitated. Paris, for a young man who never felt tired, was much more fun than even Augustine had prophesied, and thanks to his luck at cards his pockets were always full of golden louis.

Jean Bonhomme was consumptive. He coughed, and his thin legs could hardly climb the stairs which led to the apartment where his wife, Charlotte, already contaminated by the malady, took in piecework for the multiple tailors. He left both his post of night porter and his apartment and moved to Montmartre where he hoped the clear air would be good for his lungs. Charlotte went on with her piecework, but as they were childless and had a little money put aside they could now take life easier, he occasionally staying in bed, she taking more care and time over the food. They got on well together, and had it not been for the illness they might have been happy. Their apartment was on a level with the street, and when the post of *concierge*, or hall porter, became vacant they were given it, which saved them the rent. Charlotte distributed the letters, took messages, and from her bed

at night pressed a button to open the street door for the tenants. As her husband was supposed to polish the stairs Émile came along once a week to do this for him, and afterwards he would stay for lunch and a game of cards.

Every now and then the multiple tailors sent Charlotte Bonhomme a parcel of machine-cut men's suits which she distributed to a small band of seamstresses who were much poorer than she was.

Thus one morning a girl arrived with her bundle of waistcoats. Charlotte verified the seams. The waistcoats would now go to another woman who specialized in making the buttonholes and sewing on the buttons, but before this happened Charlotte herself liked to sew on the buckles and claws at the back.

On this particular day Charlotte was unusually tired. She cleared a place for the seamstress at the dining-room table, and fetching a great quantity of buckles offered the girl lunch and a little money if she would sew them on and take the waistcoats round to the buttonhole woman. This was not the first time that the young seamstress had relieved Charlotte of her work. Usually the girl's lunch consisted of fried potatoes, bought at the corner shop, and some cherries. Charlotte and her husband ate rather well, and an invitation to lunch pleased the pretty girl. So she immediately began to sew on the buckles, deftly, her head bent low, while Charlotte talked and prepared the food. An hour later the pile of metal clasps and the waistcoats smelling of new wool and dye were pushed to the far end of the table. Lunch was laid. There were to be four people—the seamstress, Charlotte, Jean Bonhomme, and Émile who was coming to polish the stairs. The two men arrived noisily and very hungry. They had called at several cafés for aperitifs and now they showed off a little by talking patois. Charlotte introduced the seamstress: 'This is Mlle Mathilde.' 'That's funny,' said Émile, looking sharply at her, 'Mathilde was the name of my poor young sister who was poisoned by a dish of mushrooms.' The seamstress, shy and sensitive, not sure whether Émile's remarks were a compliment or a reproach, coloured violently. She was only eighteen. Her skin was like milk and her head covered by red hair which burned like a bronze helmet caught by the rays of a hot sun. Every time she went out into the street people turned to look at her, and this made her horribly

self-conscious. Moreover, in black, not from choice but out of economy, she made a contrast in colours that was breath-taking. She also had a waist so slim that she could encircle it with her tiny hands. Nobody had ever seen anything like it before. But what is the good of flaming bronze hair and a seventeen-inch waist when you are timidity itself? Instead of holding her head high in the street, she brushed against the wall, feeling her heart beat with shame because men looked so hard at her.

Émile, a travelled man, having seen things at Nice and at Monte Carlo, was suffocated by this golden top. The frailty of the schoolgirl brought out the man in him. Her fingers, as she took the crockery, appeared like butterflies poising for timeless moments on each thing, then fluttering away ethereal. Unconsciously he began to make comparisons between this delicate apparition and the imposing fatness of Juliette seated like a Teutonic goddess behind the cash-desk of her gilded café.

As soon as lunch was over Matilda began to sew again. The two men went off and Mme Bonhomme, washing up, said: 'Yes, as I tell you, that man Émile is as strong as ten men, but he is a bit hasty and drinks more than is good for him, though I reckon a wife would make all the difference'; and she went on to tell Matilda about Émile's good fortune in having a dignified and wealthy woman, even though a few years his senior, so anxious to make him financially independent for the rest of his life. Just after five, all the waistcoats having their buckles firmly attached, the two women totted up how many buttons it would be necessary to take to the woman whose business it was to sew them on. Charlotte treated her buttons with right regard to their cost, giving only two or three more than the total count in case of loss or breakage. The garments were then placed in a square of green serge, the ends of which were tied tightly. Matilda counted her earnings, placed the silver in the purse she carried hidden in an underskirt, and was taking up the green serge parcel when Émile, who had been secretly waiting, arrived, offering awkwardly to carry her waistcoats for a little way up the street.

When Émile lifted the parcel he did it with a great flourish to give her a picture of his strength. Together they climbed six storeys to the woman who was to sew on the buttons. Then Émile offered Matilda something to drink at the terrace of a café. As they sat out in the warm air he questioned her eagerly, but she,



having fresh in her ears the marvellous story of the rich widow anxiously waiting for Émile to marry her, instead of realizing that her companion had fallen in love with her at first sight, imagined that he was merely being polite, in memory, doubtless, of his sister poisoned by the mushrooms. They left each other at the corner of the street. Émile felt himself quite a different man. When, because he had nothing else to do, he sauntered into the beautiful Juliette's café for his evening game of cards she welcomed him with a round of abuse. This was his day off. Even though he had gone to Jean Bonhomme's to polish the stairs he had no business to have stayed so late. What was his excuse this time? 'I suppose I can do what I like, can't I?' retorted Émile angrily. 'After all, we're not married!' The unfortunate Juliette winced. Not yet being married was just what rankled and she had been unwise to allow the quarrel to take this dangerous turn. Her heart was full of forgiveness, but Émile, now he had seen Matilda, was no longer touchable. Instead of sitting down for cards, he walked back angrily to his hotel. Juliette wondered if he had been drinking. She resolved to make this quarrel an excuse for bringing the question of marriage to a head on Sunday. As she was the one with money, and was the eldest, it was up to her to propose. Everything for her future happiness and tranquillity would thus be fixed.

Whenever Matilda went to the Bonhommes' she found Émile, who was showing quite a passion for polishing the stairs. His presence raised no flutter in her heart, for she was so convinced of his attachment for the rich widow and so absolutely certain that there was nothing about her person to arouse the affections of men, that she neither saw nor understood anything. The Bonhommes, on the other hand, quickly sensed what was happening, but they could not understand how this insignificant seamstress with freckles and red hair, a young woman so shy and awkward, quite incapable of saying two words without blushing, could have knocked over this fine fellow from Nice with whom all the richest women were madly in love, who during carnival time on the Riviera was pelted with the largest and most beautiful bouquets.

Charlotte felt a curious animosity towards her seamstress. A natural compassion for the shy young woman was now replaced by a feeling that Matilda was neither poor nor lonely any longer

but quite likely to outwit Juliette. She began to give her the hardest and longest work instead of the easiest, and Matilda had to drink black coffee at night not to fall asleep over her sewing.

Juliette now suspected a rival. She grew morbidly jealous, and decided to make a surprise call on the Bonhommes to discover why Émile remained with them so long on his days off. She arrived so early that Charlotte was alone in the kitchen. The two women, though each had heard so much about the other, had not met before. Within a few minutes they were fast friends. In a way they could both claim to have been successful in life, putting some money aside, able to look down a little on those who had to count every farthing. They were capable women and knew how to run a home. They drank several cups of mid-morning coffee, exchanging confidences, but not yet touching on that question which it would not have been wise to broach too soon. The important thing was first to establish a solid intimacy.

After about an hour Matilda arrived with her piece goods under her arm, and then Juliette, seeing a change in Charlotte's face, and the strange beauty that emanated from the pale features of this copper-haired seamstress, understood that here was her rival. Charlotte, having recovered from her momentary embarrassment, and silently allying herself with her new friend, took up each garment critically, biting her lips and examining the work with a hard look, trying to find fault. She took from her purse the money she owed Matilda after which, instead of giving her a new batch of work, she remained motionless and harsh, intent only on gaining Juliette's approval. To Matilda she said at last: 'I shall not need you any more. I have discovered a woman who works much faster and quite as well.'

Matilda hung her head, and went to the door as if she had done something wrong. When she had gone Charlotte looked up with expectation at her new friend, hoping for a bright smile of thanks, but Juliette had been going through the most painful emotions during this scene, and now burst out in an explosion of injured pride.

When Émile found that Matilda was not working any more for Charlotte, he went to wait for her at the street door of her lodging-house, in the evenings, as soon as he was free, but it was not till the following Sunday, in the morning, that she came down, paler and very thin. He asked her what she planned

to do and she answered that as Charlotte refused a reference nobody would give her any sewing, and she was now anxious to make enough money to pay her fare back to Blois where she was born. Émile's heart was touched and he invited her to lunch. They spent the afternoon together, and the same evening he asked her to marry him, saying he had loved her from the beginning, and that it was the first time that such a thing had happened to him. 'But then,' she queried, 'isn't it true about the rich widow Charlotte said you were going to marry?'

'I'm not in love with her,' answered Émile, 'and never have been, and the proof is that if you were to refuse me I would be the most unhappy man in the world.' He implored her to accept him in spite of the fact that he was older than she was, quite a lot older, so that he was just as afraid of appearing ridiculous as Juliette had been in wanting him to marry her.

There was no point in prolonging their engagement. They went to find the priest of the parish in which Matilda had her room and their banns were published. Émile chose an employee of his hotel as witness. He had asked his friend Jean Bonhomme to attend their marriage but Jean, influenced by Charlotte, refused. As long as the Bonhommes had believed that Émile might change his mind and return obediently to Juliette, they had not altogether put an end to their friendship, but when the banns were finally published outside the town hall, and it was clear to everybody that poor Émile had quite lost his wits, then Jean openly declared himself against his former friend.

Émile and his young wife went to live in a tiny apartment in the rue Lepic in Montmartre among the people from Brittany and the Auvergne I have already described. Émile had said they would buy the furniture by degrees, nice things they could later take with them to a larger place, but the gold pieces which hitherto Émile had won with so little trouble ceased magically. Anybody might have supposed that his luck had changed from the very moment of his marriage. Nostalgically he thought back to the money he had made at the races, playing cards, and all of which had been thrown away so light-heartedly. Nothing seemed to work any more. He had less time to go to the races, and when he laid a bet it was done so hurriedly and the horse never won. He sometimes played cards but as he was afraid to lose the stakes were small. Jean having said something to the manager, Émile

lost his job at the hotel. They bought one or two cheap bits of furniture, but Matilda soon realized that she was not to have the bedroom suite, and especially the wardrobe with mirrors she had always dreamed about.

Now that Émile had lost his job, he realized he knew no trade. Matilda's prospects were perhaps a little brighter. The people in the warehouse were more inclined to trust her because she was a married woman and she could get practically all the work she liked. She continued to make seams and sew on buttons but still later into the night because, for some weeks at any rate, she would be obliged to keep Émile.

Émile started to take casual work and then drifted into the building trade, leaving his young wife early in the morning to go with a band of workmen to the outskirts of Paris, to St. Cloud or perhaps St. Germain, where new houses were being put up. Matilda stayed at home, bending over her sewing-machine.

The Bonhommes watched the newly married couple from a distance, and though it was they who had severed relations every little thing that happened to Matilda or to Émile, and especially every misfortune, was discussed from all possible angles as if their hatred had become a necessity at all costs to be nourished. Juliette had no happiness but to lament in the company of Charlotte, and from surprise and indignation they came at last to revenge, not so much on Émile, whom they feared for his physical strength and violent temper, but on Matilda who was the very picture of a weak, shy, and insignificant woman whom it would be a real pleasure to torture. The fact that she was alone nearly every day would increase any pain they could inflict on her, for she would brood over the poison they would begin to instil by a series of anonymous letters addressed to Émile. To make more certain of their arrival they would be registered. If the postman could not find Émile, the unfortunate man on his return from work would have to go to the post office to collect personally the injurious sheets. He was no match for the Bonhommes in this insidious warfare. Like Dumas's musketeers he liked to catch hold of a man and fight him in the open. As the Bonhommes had calculated Matilda was the one to suffer. When the postman knocked in the morning, asking for Émile, brandishing in front of her the registered letter that, by French law, could alone be handed to the addressee, she began to blush with shame, her

heart beating with unknown fear. All day alone, bending over her sewing, not bothering even to eat, she waited in trepidation for his homecoming. The Bonhommes, seeing that their victims, even the redoubtable Émile, did nothing, became bolder and now sent their poisonous letters direct to Matilda who hid them from her husband fearing that at last he would lose patience and murder his former friend. Émile's immense strength gave her no sense of security. He was too unpredictable in his moods. Inebriated, he would not have known what he was doing. It was her constant fear that his chivalrous Quixotic nature would one day land him in a criminal adventure. She was already learning to suffer silently, but her anguish was so real that in the end she dared not even leave the house for fear of finding Juliette waiting for her in the street. Soon it was not sufficient, in her frenzied thought, to remain at home but she must barricade the door in case Juliette called on her. Sometimes, of course, she was obliged to deliver her work, and then she went down the stairs on tiptoe, and in the street clung to the walls like a fugitive from justice. One day, as she had feared, while sewing she heard footsteps climbing, stopping on the stair-head. Juliette, finding the door locked, insulted her for everybody to hear, laughed loudly, made fun of her red hair and her white skin which she said was that of a dead woman. After this Émile took a different apartment hoping that Juliette would lose trace of them. But Matilda, in these new rooms, suddenly discovered she was pregnant and now, strong in the hope of her child, she was no longer afraid of Juliette or the Bonhommes. She was only nineteen. Shaking off the nightmare of the last few months she worked even harder. Émile worked hard also, but there were days when it rained and the workmen were dismissed.

The anonymous letters began again. Matilda, needle in hand, turned over the cruellest tortures to punish her enemies. She thought about nothing else for hours, and her character, which had never been gay, now took on a sombre manner. The momentary feeling that she could conquer her fears did not last.

of fire. He was to be idiotic, the child of a witch and a drunkard. All these abominations weighed upon her tired mind, the mind of a young woman of nineteen, the loveliest age in a woman.

She spent the whole summer making all the money she could and, jealous of every minute of daylight, never went out. When her deliverance was at hand she went off stoically to hospital in the middle of a thunderstorm. Because of her long weeks of immobility she suffered cruelly from her kidneys, and complained so much that one of the nurses said to her roughly:

‘That’s enough! Anybody would think you were the first woman to have a child!’

Timorous, as always, she tried to stifle her moans, whereupon a doctor, standing near, went up to her bed and patting her on the cheek exclaimed:

‘Go ahead, little girl, have a good cry. How old are you?’

‘Nineteen, doctor.’

‘Well, well, at nineteen you have the right to do anything!’

She had a little girl whose hair was not red, as the enemy had prophesied, but blonde. Émile was very proud, and when Matilda heard that her girl was fair, she went soundly to sleep. The date was 13th August which, some people said, would prove lucky for the baby.

THE little Madeleine was put out to nurse at Soissons with a countrywoman who had a baby boy, but as my parents allowed half the winter to pass without having me baptised, the village priest so worked upon the mind of my foster-mother, saying she must not continue to give the breast to a pagan, that she threatened to put me out of doors unless my parents came immediately to arrange for my christening. This priest had been annoyed that my mother had not called on him when she first brought me to Soissons, but she was probably too much affected to think of this detail, and in any case, shy as she was, she would never have dared call on a stranger.

My parents were thus obliged to undertake the expense of the journey, choosing two days at Christmas. The woman who looked after me agreed to be my godmother.

That winter was a hard one for Émile because the building trade was in the doldrums, but by this time my mother had made the acquaintance of Mme Gaillard and had quite given up working for the multiple shops. One day Émile, crossing the lower end of the rue Lepic, saw a funeral procession, and, asking the neighbours, learnt that his old friend and enemy, Jean Bonhomme, consumed by tuberculosis, had just died. When he informed my mother of this news, she said calmly: 'And so they shall all die who set out to hurt me, for what harm have I ever done to anybody?' There was not the slightest look of pity in her eyes, whereas my father, violent as he was, was quick to forgive. It was in his character to flare up one moment and to forgive the next. But Matilda, rancorous and weak, having suffered too deeply from the persecution of these wretches, had learned no other way to alleviate misery than by a long-kept-up vengeance.

It was Émile's practice each evening to go down to the café below our flat for an innocent game of cards. My mother accompanied him, not to play cards but to sit modestly in a corner, mending for Mme Berthier, the owner of the café. This woman

occasionally did my mother the honour to sit beside her. She too had a baby daughter put out to nurse in the country, and she found in my mother a woman admirably suited to sympathize with her unhappiness in being robbed of the joy of watching her child grow up. At this hour Mme Berthier's elder sister, Mme Gaillard, would arrive with her umbrella and the boxes in which she kept her lace. Married to a useless man, aged by the many children she had brought with difficulty into the world (put out immediately in her native Auvergne), she was constantly making the journey to those parts either to carry a fresh baby to the wet nurse or to bury one who had died from want of care. Though she handled gold all day life was hard with her.

Her shop—by which I mean her umbrella and the boxes—was put up every morning in the carriage entrance of a fine apartment house in the Boulevard Haussmann, between two fashionable Parisian stores, the *Galleries Lafayette* and the *Magasin du Printemps*. Rich and poor passed in front. Foreigners visiting one or other of these magnificently gilded emporiums were dazzled by the whiteness and beauty of her rare lace. This woman, who at home was bruised and beaten by a brutal husband, had tucked at the bottom of her heart a shining passion for this luxury trade, and when she was behind her umbrella she was a matchless business woman, judging to a nicety her customer, knowing exactly by the manner of the stranger's dress and speech what would please, and never making a mistake in the change though she could not read.

She seldom reached her doorway till eleven had struck, having previously visited in all the finest hotels, the English, German, American, and Argentine women who were her most enthusiastic customers. To these she showed her latest discoveries, measuring them for blouses or taking their orders for table linen. As soon as she reached her place of business she unrolled a wide piece of scarlet material, hanging it against a panel of one of the two immense doors. In front of this she put out the umbrella and the trestled table, and from behind these she did not move till seven, not even for her lunch of fried potatoes and black coffee brought from across the street.

As if the martyrdom of her home life was not enough, Mme Gaillard was obliged to suffer the slings and irony of the doorkeeper and the doorkeeper's wife from whom she rented that



half of the carriage door which formed her shop. The door-keeper, wearing a striped waistcoat, a blue apron, and a black silk skull-cap, spent his afternoons seated on a low chair upholstered in red velvet, holding a walking-stick, on which he rested his chin, between his knees. Thus occupied he decorated, by his colourful presence, the second of the double doors. Keeping an eye on his tenants when they came in or went out, but scarcely removing his gaze from the unfortunate Mme Gaillard and her customers, he never spoke to her except to say something disagreeable about her lack of authority towards her husband and predicting that before long she would sink into poverty, a state which Mme Gaillard herself was only too well aware might befall her.

Sunny days were the best, but even though it rained Mme Gaillard was obliged to stay, sheltering against the door; for in addition to her customers she received here the many women who either made lace on a spindle at home or, like my mother, put together blouses. It was a fine sight indeed to see her measure the narrow laces. She would use a tape-measure with the customers but for the lacemakers it was the tip of her nose to the outstretched hand and, while asking news of the family in patois, gossiping about this and that, the lace was measured in swift flashes, and unhappy the passer-by who, during this operation, thought it safe to filch something quickly out of the open boxes! When the lace was measured and the price agreed upon, Mme Gaillard would pull out from under her apron of black pleated satinette an accordion shaped purse like those the cattle dealers use at market, a shiny, grubby thing that she opened cautiously and closed suspiciously, angry with herself for having revealed its existence to prying eyes. One heard it fall loudly to the bottom of the deep pocket in her skirt. Then diving behind her merchandise, yards of lace wound round blue cardboard, she would look for a black note-book on whose yellowed pages she made signs to remind her of the transaction she had just completed. Illiterate, her language on paper was after the Egyptian manner, a series of childlike pictures and signs by which each sort of lace was differently represented, each coin secretly remembered, the name of the work girl or woman memorized artistically by depicting some peculiarity of face, speech, or way of walking.

When Mme Gaillard came to join her sister, Mme Berthier,

and my mother in the café at night she would take advantage of this quiet place to tally her accounts before going home to her husband, and for this reason she would be obliged to bring out her note-book and, being long-sighted, would hold it at arm's length which allowed my mother to study the curious entries I have just described. Mme Berthier said these hieroglyphics were chiefly to confuse her husband, but she was no judge, not being able to write herself, and no night passed without Mme Gaillard announcing to the two women in the café: 'There, my dears, another dreadful day!' And she would put two fingers in her purse and draw out some small silver, being careful not to open the compartments which held the larger silver and the gold.

She had been in Paris for a great number of years. In their native Auvergne her husband had followed the picturesque profession of pit-sawing by which, before the invention of mechanical saws, laths and floor boards were hewn from the tree. This age-old craft gives a man a great thirst and Gaillard had succeeded in drinking as many as thirty pints of wine a day. The whole of his salary was employed in this manner and their penury became such that they decided to begin life again in Paris. I presume that by this time planks were being cut by electricity. Gaillard, like Émile, looked to the building trade for employment. His speciality was to dig the trenches in which the bricklayers laid their walls. His features were scarlet and puffed out horribly, and his nose so large and pitted that it resembled a pincushion. Mme Gaillard, unable to admire this unlovely husband, showed a growing affection for her eldest son, a delicate lad of fifteen who was still in the Auvergne. He was like his mother both in appearance and courage and wrote her long letters which she brought to my mother, to Émile, or to the *concierger* to read to her.

My poor mother had now fresh reasons for unhappiness. Though Émile, when the weather was fine, worked hard, as hard as even she could have wished, he earned little and spent far too much at the café. I think he had not ceased to love my mother, but absinthe made a tiger of him, and when he became violent the sight of my mother, pale and silent, increased the devil in him, so that in an attempt to make her speak or cry he would shatter whatever object was nearest his hand, whereupon her misery was doubled, for, as you can imagine, she had not the wherewithal to replace the most common utensils in the house. Marie-Thérèse

chose this moment to make a second appearance, and as she was again without work my parents laid a mattress on the floor and rather unwillingly offered her hospitality. She was not altogether cheerless about the future, having paid a countrywoman a month in advance for looking after her daughter Rolande. She spent the days looking for work and the nights dancing at the Moulin de la Galette and Bullier's. Émile, who quickly repented his generosity in having Marie-Thérèse in the house, but not being brave enough to send her away, made her presence the excuse of new and more terrible quarrels which my aunt, as gay as ever, seemed not to notice. At least, my mother had a companion with whom from time to time she could gossip, recalling their childhood at Blois, discussing the eldest sister Margaret with whom momentarily neither was on speaking terms, and rediscovering some of the fragrance of girlhood affection which had united them at school and during apprentice days. Matilda blamed Marie-Thérèse for her frivolity whilst Marie-Thérèse blamed her sister for her want of spirits and energy, not perceiving in these faults an infinite capacity for hard work. Consider that my mother at this period even busied herself on Sunday mornings washing the linen and the sheets. She had never been inside a theatre and had only danced as a little girl with the soldiers in the open air at Blois, being dressed in a very short skirt and wearing her hair long in the back, that golden hair which streamed down like a river on fire. She was much too young, too blushing, too delicate a flower to be married to a man who would have needed a sturdy fishwife to stand up to him, to counter his choleric outbursts with a fine flow of words. She was infinitely too young to have one child already and to be expecting a second. Nevertheless it was my mother who with her needle and agile fingers built a wall against misery on those days of rain, sleet, and snow when Émile was unable to make houses. Marie-Thérèse, herself, just now was also taking advantage of my mother's magic needle. Mme Berthier was perhaps the only person who appreciated my mother's stoic answer to her destiny. She occasionally let fly at Émile about it, and my father, who was good-natured at heart, hurried up to my mother with immediate offers of forgiveness as if she, and not he, were the offending person. She met his advances without enthusiasm, being convinced that life reserved for her the hard lot of a Russian peasant woman—

work, children, and, by way of diversity, an occasional thrashing. Up to now Émile had not beaten her, but she feared him.

Her delivery being near, she made a parcel of her things and, accompanied by Marie-Thérèse, walked to the Lariboisière hospital. Émile, on his return that night, was surprised to find the house empty. He was annoyed, thinking his womenfolk had gone shopping, and began to work himself up into a fine temper because supper would be late. When Marie-Thérèse came back alone he became nervous, and hearing what had happened ran off to the hospital in great commotion. On his return, very late, extremely in need of a person to talk things over with, aware like all men of his inability to be of any use on these occasions, fretting, looking forward to questioning Marie-Thérèse and to confiding in her, he found nobody at home again. She had gone out dancing! Put out, quite torn with anxiety, he went dismally to bed.

As early as he dare in the morning he went to the Lariboisière where he learnt that he had a son. He now flew back home where Marie-Thérèse, who had arrived during his absence, was fast asleep on her mattress. He woke her with the great news, saying that he was going straight back to see her sister, that he would not go to work that morning, and wanted her to make lunch early. She clapped her hands joyfully, congratulated him, and fell asleep again.

When Émile arrived at my mother's bedside and saw his son, he was moved like all powerful men looking at the tiny, helpless thing which is theirs and requires protection. At this moment he would have done anything for my mother. He had missed her terribly during the night, and he was now very proud that she had given him a son. She asked him what was happening at home and he told her that Marie-Thérèse had gone out dancing all night. At the thought of it, anger rose in his throat, but she refused to say anything, knowing how easily she could add to his wrath. Besides, she was worried about a big pile of his dirty socks which she had put to soak before going to hospital. She thought they might spoil, in addition to which they all needed mending. She liked her husband to have a clean pair every morning. He needed them, and this necessity had become a rite which would be broken unless Marie-Thérèse could be persuaded to go on with it. She also thought that if Émile did not have

his clean socks there would be quarrels she would not be there to appease.

My mother's short stay at the hospital proved a holiday for her. She ate well and read lazily in bed. On the Sunday morning Émile arrived. My mother saw immediately from the whiteness of his cheeks that he was bringing her bad news. He covered with wide steps the few yards between the door and her bed, and at his first words she knew that her fears had not been idle. Not once, since her confinement, had he found the evening soup waiting for him! Not once had he found a clean pair of socks! And last night a dreadful smell had revealed, in a dark corner, the basin in which the dirty socks had been rotting in soapy water for the last week! What else could he have done but to throw Marie-Thérèse with her baggage and her silly novelettes out into the street? He had told her never to set foot in his house again. If ever she came to the hospital to complain about him, he would smack her in front of all the nurses!

Matilda winced. The holiday was over. These sudden worries turned her milk. Her baby son began to cry from hunger. She left hospital in a sad state, and after a few days at home took the train to Soissons where she would put her son out to nurse and visit her daughter. I was then eleven months old, and when my mother saw me she was jealous because I treated her as a stranger, calling out 'Mama!' to the woman she paid to look after me.

Back in Paris life became more and more difficult for my mother. Before long, also, the woman with whom my little brother was put out sent alarming news about his health. He was always hungry. The doctor had come. Then, one day, came a telegram. My brother was dead. The wet nurse, having seen him so hungry, had given him an egg beaten up in milk. Diarrhoea had begun and within twenty-four hours there was one more angel in heaven. Émile and my mother took the train for Soissons, close to each other in their misery, and my mother has told me that her son, in death, looked so much like his father that it startled her. After the funeral they took the train back to Paris, my mother holding a parcel containing her child's baby-clothes, tight to her heart. They had no time to visit me, nor the money, I think, for my mother had been obliged to borrow some money from Mme Berthier for the coffin, and to pay off the woman.

My mother was not the sort of person to bear a debt lightly, and she took on an increasing amount of work which, added to her grief, finally gave that stamp of sombreness to her character which had been only too ready to assert itself in her more tender years. As, during these joyless days, she sewed alone in her room she set herself the further task, after repaying the money to Mme Berthier, of putting enough aside to bring me back from Soissons, partly to lessen her loneliness, partly because having lost one child she was afraid to lose the other. Though in appearance she was like some tender flower whose bright but delicate head seemed always on the point of drooping, she had the nervous resistance of many apparently weak women, and when her mind was set on a thing, she was able to go forward, resisting the longest hours and the worst storms of her marital unhappiness. It was at this period of lonely contemplation that she learnt of the death of Charlotte Bonhomme. Later came news that the comely Juliette, so flourishing but yesterday, had cancer and was in hospital for an operation from which she was not likely to make more than temporary recovery. I am not sure to what extent these terrible facts satisfied my mother's inborn desire for vengeance. Death had touched her too closely and too recently for her to get much enjoyment out of a sensation which is necessarily more virulent in youth than when experience begins to soften us. At any rate, a phase in her married life was over, and though she still had no illusions about her future she could go out into the street without fear of being insulted.

One evening in the extreme heat of a Montmartre summer my mother was serving an omelet and a fresh salad to Émile by the open window when she heard what she thought for a moment was a voice calling her faintly in the yard. Almost at the same time her husband spoke to her, and she did not dare pay any further attention to the voice, about which she might so easily have made a mistake. Later, however, another voice, strong and unmistakable, that of Mme Berthier, calling 'Matilda!' came up into the room. This time my mother took it that Mme Gaillard had sent her sister with some message about a lace blouse and she ran quickly down. In the shadow of the courtyard, against the damp stone wall, trembling, Marie-Thérèse stood with her baby Rolande wrapped in a woollen shawl and clasped tightly in her thin arms. She explained in short, breathless sentences

that having been without work since Émile had thrown her out into the street, she had been unable to pay the woman with whom the baby had been deposited, that neighbouring country-women had written to say the infant was being left to starve, and that she had spent all the money she possessed to go to fetch her unfortunate daughter. The wet nurse had refused to give her the baby's clothes until the debt was settled with the result that Marie-Thérèse had brought her back in her own shawl. 'Now there is nothing left for us,' she exclaimed, clutching the child nearer to her, 'than to jump into the Seine!'

How changed was this pretty frivolous sister! No happy turn had yet come in the novel of Marie-Thérèse's existence and indeed it seemed that the story might that same evening end in a suicide.

'Is he up there?' queried Marie-Thérèse in a whisper.

'Yes,' answered Matilda.

'I know,' said Marie-Thérèse. 'Mme Berthier came out of the café to warn me. It was she who called out to you.'

Matilda looked round, and in spite of the stifling night she was as nervous, as trembling, as her sister.

'Wait!' she exclaimed. 'I'll go and see what I can do!'

My mother came back very white, her lips twitching, and as she stood in the doorway, not yet brave enough to speak, Émile said sharply, looking up from his paper:

'What a time you've been! Gossiping again?'

'Émile, listen to me! Marie-Thérèse is downstairs.'

'I told you I never wanted to see her again!' said Émile, throwing down his paper and getting ready to roll up his sleeves.

'She has the baby with her,' my mother objected softly, 'and they haven't eaten for three days.' She went very close to her husband and went on: 'What am I to do? Shall I send them away?'

My father's good nature immediately welled up and, remembering how only a few weeks back he had walked behind the tiny coffin along the powdery road outside Soissons, he said huskily, trying to hide his emotion in a manly way:

'Let them come up then!'

Matilda flew down the narrow, uneven stairs, into the yard where, seeing her sister so weak, so terrified at the thought of meeting Émile, she took the baby and led her by the hand. Émile said nothing and Marie-Thérèse, cringing, did not

recognize the look of pity in his eyes. She went past him and wept, stupid with fatigue and hunger.

My mother cleared the table, and taking a pillow from her bed laid the baby on it, removing the soaked swaddling cloths.

‘Hold her a moment, Émile,’ she said quietly, and he, obediently, placed his strong, hairy hand under the baby’s soft chest whilst my mother took from the bottom of a drawer the package of poignantly evocative garments she had brought back with her from her baby son’s funeral at Soissons.

‘Everything is just as the woman gave it me,’ she whispered to Émile. ‘It’s all we have left of *him*. At least they will come in useful, useful to some other little innocent.’

Émile was crying. Whilst Marie-Thérèse sobbed helplessly in her corner, my father and mother washed the inanimate Rolande, thin and white-cheeked. My mother began to think that she was really dressing her little niece for the coffin. She sent Émile down to find some milk. After this hot summer’s day there was not any to be had. He went to Mme Berthier, thinking that she, at least, would help.

‘I’ve none,’ she answered, ‘but as the baby has had nothing for several days you would only kill it.’ Then pouring out some boiled water from a kettle: ‘Give the child some of this with a little sugar.’

When Émile saw Rolande washed and in clean things but even whiter than at first he began to lose his head, but my mother put some of the sugared water in the baby’s mouth and they both saw the blood run up to the cheeks, colouring them like rose petals. Small blue eyes opened, lids closed, and sleep came. Though Marie-Thérèse was still sobbing, the tears which streamed down her cheeks seemed at last to be doing her good and she accepted a few leaves of lettuce and a glass of wine which Émile put out at the end of the table. My mother, seeing her husband so moved, fetched the mattress which had always been her sister’s bed on these occasions and laid it on the floor. Marie-Thérèse cried herself to sleep and the baby was put on a pillow beside her.

Émile had quietly disappeared to play cards with his friends at the café, and soon my mother went to join him, thinking that Mme Berthier might be of further counsel. This excellent woman wisely suggested that Rolande be sent back to the country as soon as she was well enough to travel. She knew too much about



Émile's character to think his present docility would last, and his violence would not only make life impossible for the two women but might kill the child.

It was wonderful next morning to see how anxious Marie-Thérèse appeared to repay my parents' hospitality by going off to find work. Rolande, also, who remained in my mother's care, made one of those rapid recoveries which so often snatch babies from the very shadow of death, and give them, almost as one is ready to despair, fine pink cheeks and healthy, kicking limbs. Marie-Thérèse, whose great interest in life, apart from reading novels and dancing, was to make gay hats, had been introduced by the doorkeeper's wife to a modiste who lived on a higher floor and this modiste had engaged my aunt for the equivalent of thirty shillings a week and her keep which arrangement promised to supply her with a home and enough money to send Rolande back to the country.

Mme Pauline was the name of this modiste and a great number of the smartest *demi-mondaines* climbed the five storeys leading to her apartment for the honour of acquiring her airy creations. Circus riders also came to Mme Pauline, and all these ladies drove up in their smart carriages. Marie-Thérèse was at last certain that the novel of her life was taking a better turn and that the preliminary difficulties had been merely put in her way to give greater splendour to the next chapters. Mme Pauline, friendly, talkative, hard-working, was so clever at building up on her fist one of those magnificent hats of which she alone had the secret, that Marie-Thérèse was quite faint with admiration. Here was the Parisian woman in all the wealth of her inborn taste! The admiration of the apprentice was most agreeable to the expert. They were both about the same age and often, in the evening, Mme Pauline would take Marie-Thérèse to the Cirque de Paris or to Médrano for which she had, of course, from her many equestrian customers a great number of free tickets. The smell of the sawdust, the lights, the beating of the drums, opened the way to fresh dreams. Diana de Poitiers and Laure de Valenciennes in shimmering white or hope-spelling green, spangled with tinsel, a top-hat worn swaggeringly over golden locks, stood on their white horses in the blinding arc-lamps, whilst from every part of the arena moustached admirers in evening dress with black capes, cigars between lips, clapped enthusiastically, their

gold-topped canes under their arms. These finely dressed men, these women so artistically made up, these splashes of colour and prancing horses, gave comforting reality to my aunt's dreams, and when the circus was over Mme Pauline and she would have a liqueur on the crowded terrace of the Café de la Paix.

Our doorkeeper's wife had a young maid-of-all-work called Ermeline, and my aunt, having made the acquaintance of this serious and excellent person, decided to utilize the skill she had recently acquired from Mme Pauline to make her a hat. Ermeline, who had come from her native village of Marais in the Cher, in the hopes of earning enough money to find a husband on her return, had not worn a hat before, having travelled to Paris in a lace bonnet; and when she saw the beautiful thing Marie-Thérèse had created gratitude surged up and she was struck with the same burning admiration as my aunt had so recently felt for Mme Pauline.

Marie-Thérèse was delighted to have made her first hat and to see in Ermeline's happy features the proof that it was really liked. They became quite friendly, and soon Ermeline was told all about Rolande whose nurse in the country was now asking thirty shillings a week which left Marie-Thérèse no money at all for herself. Ermeline was a little put out to learn that her friend, though unmarried, had a child, but being goodness itself offered to take Rolande to her mother at Marais who, being widowed, lived with a deaf sister in a thatched cottage on the fringe of a wheatfield and had a little girl from the poor-law administration to look after. Marie-Thérèse was delighted and Rolande was transferred to Ermeline's mother and the orphan girl.

At about this time Émile was called up for a second course of military training at Nice, and it was decided that on his return he would call first on his sister Mme Agnel who, with her husband, was living in a fine new house all done up in white, with vines and tomatoes in the garden, at the Grand' Combe, and then go to Soissons to collect me from my foster-mother and bring me back to Paris.

The dark, narrow streets of Montmartre seemed very airless to Émile when he arrived at the café below the damp, stone house, with the unaccustomed burden of an eighteen-month-old daughter and a canary in a cage which last he had bought on the journey. His lungs were still full of mountain air and his skin

burnt by a Mediterranean sun. Montmartre suddenly appeared repellent to him. During his absence Juliette had died from the inevitable recurrence of her grievous illness. Mme Berthier had suddenly decided to sell her café and go to live in her beloved Auvergne before it was too late. The unhealthy air, the fetid water of the open drains running crookedly over cobble-stones, the coal dust in the yard, were leading her slowly towards tuberculosis. Others also were preparing to go, either to spend what they had amassed in Paris in the villages where they were born or merely trying to find a cure for their restlessness by exchanging one part of the city for another.

One Sunday morning Émile borrowed a hand-cart and, with the help of a companion, started to remove the furniture. We were to follow the Avenue de Clichy as far as the old fortified walls of the city and, from there, go down to the bank of the Seine where new apartment houses had recently gone up. We would have purer air, the sight of some leaves and grass, and a less costly neighbourhood than Montmartre.

The two men made several journeys, Émile in front, strapped between the shafts, his friend behind, one hand placed with a protective air against a piece of bruised furniture. Other Parisian families were also on the move, and every now and again the men would leave their possessions, together with the women and the children, at the side of the road whilst they went to refresh themselves in a café. At the end of the day, fatigue and too many libations would lead inevitably to quarrels and blows.

THE year 1909 ended for my mother with the birth of a son who was to be her last child. He came into the world in the new apartment at Clichy and his arrival that Christmas constitutes my earliest memory. My maternal grandmother had come specially from Blois, dressed entirely in black and carrying an immense umbrella and a wicker basket in which a dozen pots of home-made gooseberry jam were wrapped up in a linen napkin smelling of lavender. As soon as the cover was removed from one of these jars, all the delicious evocations of a sunny garden in the Loire filled the room. The colour and taste of the fruit charmed the little girl that I was.

My baby brother had red hair, my mother's rather sad beauty, and was quite adorable when being bathed in the washtub. I recall equally the gentle hours we spent watching him asleep in his cot, my mother with a lace blouse between her delicate fingers and I, sitting on a low stool beside her with fragments of lace I had picked up from the floor trying to sew without pricking my fingers, not daring to cry when I did so for fear of waking my brother. Occasionally my mother would sing softly, with a little catch in her voice in the sentimental parts, the romances she had learnt at Blois from the seamstresses in her apprentice days. There were passages which the little girl found passionately unintelligible but which she interpreted as she could, helped by an already strong imagination, unhappy love, children without fathers, patriotic songs of the war of 1870 in which figured the tricolour, lilac in bloom, and the woods of Meudon. I learnt early to play without making a noise, most often at being haberdasher with my mother as the customer who bought everything, paying with buttons, patiently lending me her scissors to cut out tiny designs from her lace. These were indeed gentle hours! The baby would wake up, whereupon my mother would lift him up out of the cot addressing him in a language of her own. Then

taking the pins from her corsage she would proudly give him the breast. All was calm. One listened to the tiny creature feeding, and kneading with plump fingers the milk-heavy bosom.

I remember also Émile coming home one evening with a young fox-terrier which had followed him in the street. Dogs and children were attracted by the loud authority in his voice and they alone, perhaps, perceived his deep hidden goodness. He called the terrier Follette. Knocking me over, she showed her friendliness and gratitude at being given a home by pawing and barking, but my mother was resentful, saying that there was no place for a dog in an apartment of one room and a kitchen and in which there were two children. No dog could have kept quieter in the daytime than Follette who intelligently sensed my mother's antagonism. She was anxious, in these circumstances, to remain unnoticed and scarcely emerged from her hiding-place even for food, but at night, hearing Émile's footsteps long before my mother did, she would run to the door, sniff and yelp, and when Émile arrived her happiness would have touched any woman less embittered by life than my mother. She, I think, saw in the animal's joy merely the waking of her son in the cot, and often her husband caressed the dog before he spoke to her. I have a clear picture of him at these times putting down the heavy sack in which he brought back for our stove wood salvaged from some demolished house or picked up from under the carpenter's bench. When we had all been kissed he would go out again, with the dog at his heels, and for long we would hear the animal's delirious barking as they went along the street.

My mother laid supper on the round table covered with an oil-cloth and in the centre of which she placed, on winter evenings, the lamp with its yellow flame that I likened to a mermaid in a mysterious sea. This mermaid became, at my will, a fairy, a sleeping princess, a fair damsel imprisoned in a glass tower. Then came the evening soup after which Émile would take the wood out of his sack and a pleasant odour of resin and tar would fill the room. When a piece was too large for the stove he would split it with a hatchet against a plank balanced on his knees, and when a splinter flew across the carpet Follette, her tail wagging, would bring it back in her mouth and drop it at the feet of her master, certain that she would be petted and sometimes, even, given a lump of sugar. After this ceremony Émile took a

foot-bath, which would be removed by my mother, holding it by the two handles, her young body and narrow waist bent under the weight, obedient and lovely like a Roman slave, whilst I knelt down with the slippers. He went to bed almost immediately, and within a minute or two was fast asleep, for his day began at five. His snoring was echoed by that of his dog. My mother put out a clean pair of socks, a clean shirt, the money for the subway train, and a thick slice of bread spread with dripping or hard pork sausage which he carried in his haversack to eat at midday. The remains of the evening soup she poured into a saucepan for him to heat it up before going to work. He liked to dip a piece of bread in it and always shared this early meal with the dog.

After a hard winter the Seine, in 1910, began suddenly to overflow its banks and everybody watched the stone figure of the zouave which, with its back against the central arch of the Alma bridge, is invariably used as a yardstick on such occasions. The water quickly covered the zouave's feet, rose above his gaiters, and in a few days reached his chin. Then panic took hold of those who lived nearest the river. These are my first clear-cut memories of the outside world.

Our street had become a tributary of the Seine during the night and the water continued to rise. The doorkeepers left their lodges and arranged new quarters for themselves on the first floor. As the cellars were flooded there was no coal for heating, and in ours Émile had put a cask of wine which somebody had sent him from the south of France, and this cask, half empty, had been raised by the water, and thus floating on the summit of the waves bumped so loudly and continuously against the roof of the cellar, which was also the floor of our room, that we had the impression all night of a visitation by a ghost.

Every fifty yards along the street barrels filled with stones had been laid down with ladders stretched across them to form piers on which the inhabitants waited for a service of row-boats to take them to work. A wine merchant, having sawn two vats in half, took three of these to build himself a triangular craft. Sitting in the middle one, navigating with a home-made paddle, he had filled the half-vat on his right with beer and wine bottles, and the one on his left with coal. Thus equipped, he cried: 'Beer, wine, and coal for sale!' My parents were in great fear the water would come in through the window or that our cask would end

by bumping away our floor. Émile had begun by letting down a pail at the end of a string to fetch up enough water for my mother to wash my brother's nappies, but it was so muddy that he was obliged to abandon this expedient and take a jug to the top of the street, a journey which necessitated waiting for the row-boat. Matilda, who was still breast-feeding my little brother, did not sleep at night, fearing our house would collapse as many others in the neighbourhood did. Follette disappeared and Émile never found out whether she had come across her original master, run off with another dog, or been drowned. My mother did not hide her relief, and Follette herself, I think, had understood in the end that it is not enough to be loved only by the master of the house. The doorkeepers, from their lodge, had also taken unkindly to Follette because she spoilt with muddy paws their parquet stairs. They had even threatened to complain to the landlords—two children and a dog made any tenants undesirable.

Still the Seine rose; sewer rats swam along the streets. People started to talk about a plague. A house not far from ours caught fire and firemen arrived in a punt, their shining hats reflected in the muddy water.

Then, as happened to Noah, the water suddenly fell. Émile found his cask of wine dented but in tolerable condition. His potatoes had become mixed up with his coal, and the subsiding waters had left three dead rats on the infamous heap. Our neighbours turned their attention to the coming carnival. Reopened shops decorated their windows with masks, false noses, and confetti. A new picture is now printed on my mind—the queen of the carnival on a throne surrounded by her princesses. A monkey dressed as a zouave played tricks at the end of a string. The brass bands made me cry with soldier-loving emotion. Clowns rode on elephants. Thousands of people threw confetti.

That summer little girls, older than I, played diabolos in the street; others spun coloured tops under the very wheels of the drays and horse-cabs. The cry of the creamy cheese vendor came, through the open window, into our stifling room. Her earthenware jar full of fresh cream was wrapped up in a damp napkin of the purest linen, and when, at the request of a customer, she ladled the cream on a heart-shaped cheese, the whiteness of the cream contrasted with the whiteness of the cheese, the whole handed for freshness on a leaf in an osier heart. My mother, putting a

few halfpence in one tiny hand and a salad bowl in the other, sent me with much trepidation to buy two for her lunch and mine. Soon I accompanied her to the baker, often hiding in the cages in which the long French loaves were placed. I remember the bakeress pulling me out, giving me a kiss on my forehead, and placing in my hand a *croissant* still warm from the oven.

My first remembered sight of Marie-Thérèse was on a Sunday morning in this tiny apartment which was much too small for us. My aunt wore a hat which, for a while, occupied all my attention, so marvellous and extraordinary were the size and design. Having examined it at fascinating length, I looked with no less wonder at the gentleman who had come up with her and who, exceptionally for those days, wore no moustache. Marie-Thérèse kissed my mother and me, took my baby brother in her arms, shaking him good-naturedly, and smiled affectionately at the clean-shaven gentleman who ran downstairs, returning a few moments later with a bottle of sparkling Saumur wine and some finger biscuits, which collation made everybody even merrier than before. Émile, under the influence of the health-giving wine, took strongly to the purveyor of it whilst Marie-Thérèse won me over by the gift of a doll dressed in a white cambric chemise and a hat as ornamental and enormous as her own. Moreover, with the doll, she had brought me some pieces of soft, differently coloured materials, some Italian straw, and some hat veiling, all of which being a delightful change from my mother's lace which hitherto had been my only means of amusement, filled me with such surprise and gratitude that I exclaimed piercingly: 'Oh, thank you, madame!'

'But, silly girl,' cried Émile indulgently, 'the lady is your aunt.'

Marie-Thérèse had come to invite her sister to her wedding with the clean-shaven gentleman. She had at last become a modiste with a business of her own. The small parcel of Italian straw, soft materials, and veiling were the snippings from her masterpieces, and the magnificent hat she wore and which, on more mature reflection, looked like a piece of piping set on a nest of curly, brown hair, was her proudest creation. She had remained with Mme Pauline until one night, going off to dance at Magic City, she had fallen in love with Louis Soilly and he with her.

The stream of their love had, of course, been hindered by her



secret. Her airy inconsequence, her Berrichon accent which lent a strange, perplexing colour to Parisian slang, her tiny head, not pretty, but decorated irresistibly with fun and sparkling blue eyes, had grown on him and he was all ready to declare his honourable intentions when one Sunday, she, knowing that the moment her secret was out their romance would end, decided not to meet him at the usual place and hour.

Louis Soilly waited, became impatient, working himself up into such a state that he promised to seek revenge in the arms of another woman. Gradually, however, fear assailed him that she might be ill or have slipped on account of her high heels under a hackney cab. He passed a miserable night, paid no attention to his work the next day, and in the evening, jealousy having once more gained supremacy in his mind, went to wait for her outside the establishment where she made her hats. She came out pretty and apparently unconcerned. His fury exploded all of a piece. She was unfaithful! She had spent Sunday with another man! Why couldn't she say something? Her silence condemned her! A slight colour rose to her cheeks. She looked down awkwardly, eyelashes quivering with emotion. How could she say anything whilst he continued to shout so angrily? But she must try. She began timidly to explain that there was nobody else, that she had thought of him all the time, but a moment later her gentle voice was lost in the thunder of his accusations and she became aware that people were turning round to look at them. Impotent, her cause lost, ashamed to be the centre of a crowd, anxious above all to stem this inexhaustible flow of words, she said in real despair:

'All right! Have it your own way! I shall tell you what I was doing yesterday. I was in the country with my baby girl!'

'Your baby girl?' he repeated unbelievably.

'Yes,' she answered, taking advantage of his silence to raise her voice. 'It's the truth! I swear it! Now, you can go! I'm used to men dropping me. I'm quite able to get along by myself.'

There was a long silence whilst he tried to understand the full meaning of her words, but his anger had quite subsided, and the flow of people round them had resumed its normal course. Then he asked:

'When will you go to see her again?'

'Oh,' she replied, trying to mask her happiness with a show of sarcasm, 'from now on I shall be free to go every Sunday.'

He was holding her arm. She pulled herself free and queried as a last fling:

'I suppose it *is* finished between us?'

As she looked up her interrogating blue eyes drew him nearer, and he answered boldly:

'No, it isn't. When you go to your baby again, I shall come with you.'

The following Sunday they went together to see Rolande who was growing sturdy in the care of Ermeline's mother. The little girl, from a vague desire to please, set out to charm Louis Soilly and succeeded. That evening, back in Paris after the long train journey, Louis asked my aunt to marry him. He did more. He promised that Rolande should never know he was not her father. The first volume of my aunt's life was ending, as all good novels should, with a wedding.

They were married within a week of their visit to us. Louis Soilly was a sort of majordomo, or chief butler, to a fabulously wealthy store-owner and wanted everything just right. He quickly found himself a mews flat behind a magnificent block of apartment houses in the aristocratic rue de Longchamps. The mews were entirely inhabited by the servants of the wealthy who appreciated the high-sounding address and who formed a society of their own, taking the cool air on summer evenings under the trees in the Bois de Boulogne. Almost immediately Marie-Thérèse and her husband brought Rolande to Paris, and as there were only eight months between us we were considered ideal companions.

Every alternate Sunday we lunched with the Soillys in the rue de Longchamps where my uncle kept a fine table for his friends, the men clean-shaven like himself, some of them tall, blond, extremely good-looking like Raoul the footman, who, during the week, in livery with gold buttons, wearing white gloves, sat very erect beside the coachman, breaking the heart of many a *midinette*. Raoul used to come with Hélène the doorkeeper's wife, with whom he was in love, and well he might be, for she was dark with romantic eyes and an ochrous, unpolished skin. The doorkeeper was an old man who had taken advantage of her lack of money to make her his wife. He was as jealous as a Spaniard, but his position of *concierge* was too important for

him to leave it long enough to follow his young wife who was clever, by long experience, and never went shopping or walking without her eight-year-old daughter, Françoise, whom she passed off as her sister. It was a curious thing to hear Françoise addressing her mother as Hélène. Her complicated existence, the double dealing, the transitory attachments, the lies, stratagems, and many pleasures had made of her an astute little person and she was admirably versed in the art of making capital out of her mother's duplicity. For all that one could not altogether blame the pretty young mother for making the best of her twenty-seven years. I remember her mostly in a long black skirt and a cherry-coloured blouse, the collar gracefully encircling her white, chubby neck. She sang delightfully all the tunes she picked up at the café concerts, ditties by Dranem full of allusions which made the women blush and the men puff out their cheeks and cough, and Françoise, who had a good memory, chimed in with the choruses, singing as gracefully as her mother, winking at the right moment, but probably not understanding much more than little Rolande and I.

At my uncle's also we made the acquaintance of Rose, poor fat Rose, not very young, but an excellent person who had been cook in the same house for so many years that everybody said she must have quite a little fortune. She owned a modest apartment which she went to on her days off or when her employers were travelling abroad, and nobody had quite understood why Rose, so industrious and economical, should have gone to this expense, till it became known that she had a lover. Rose the virtuous, Rose the far-from-pretty, had made the conquest of a very eligible young man. She was invited by my uncle to bring him along, and the next Sunday she arrived behind a large bunch of lilac and introduced Frederick who bowed to Marie-Thérèse and kissed her hand like a lady.

Rose was delighted to discover what a good impression Frederick had made on the company. He was gentle, knew a great many languages, and seemed not at all of our world. At Christmas he brought the most expensive toys for Rolande and me. I had a magnificent doll and a pure china tea service. Afterwards he took us all to visit the Eiffel Tower.

We now moved into another part of Clichy, a three-storeyed house of dull grey aspect but facing a large garden which, at this

moment of spring, was filled with lilac. Émile was taken by the smaller rent, the larger rooms, the possibility of storing firewood in the garden, and the idea of sitting out to smoke his pipe in the evening among the grass and trees, our apartment being on the ground floor. In the autumn the dampness of the house became alarmingly apparent, the wall-paper peeling off in our bedroom.

The lilac in the garden had momentarily hidden other aspects besides the greyness of the house. The rue Kloch, so called after a revolutionary in the Commune, paved with large, uneven stones, made grim by houses in which animals would have been less resistant than man, was the *repaire* of rag-and-bone men, ambulating fruit vendors who kept their barrows in the narrow passages of their houses, and other strange people. Mme Choblais, the owner of our house, kept ducks which dabbled about in the pestiferous water of the gutters and followed me, quacking loudly, when I went to the fountain to fill my pitcher. Their eagerness to refresh themselves was such that they gathered round me and bit my bare legs with their flat bills.

Mme Choblais was a fine-looking woman with that throaty, warm, vicious voice typical of the apache world which grew, like a dangerous moss, round the Paris fortifications, and indeed her husband was so wiry and muscled, with such an air about him, that we all called him in secret the apache. He used to disappear for weeks. On his return Mme Choblais and her children would display themselves in the market-place, she in a red or apple-green blouse with long earrings and a necklace of coloured glass, the children in frilly aprons, and whilst these acquisitions were still new nobody would do any work, and the apartment would remain unswept and the beds unmade. The husband lorded it, recounting his adventures but, strong drinker of absinthe, he would suddenly turn white and with the violence of a man in a strait jacket would set upon his family. The children, in tears, ran to their grandfather who, arming himself with a cudgel would hide behind the door, waiting for his son-in-law, determined to break his skull before he reached the children, and the apache, as afraid of the old man's club as the old man was afraid of him, spent his energy against his wife, catching her by the hair, tearing the earrings away from her bleeding ears and the satin blouse from her bosom, and finally, when his anger was spent and the vapours diminished in his

brain, hurling her like a bundle of dirty linen into a corner. Then, tired and satisfied, he would go to bed; or rather throw himself upon it, fully dressed, and sleep heavily for five or six hours. Soon after our arrival the grandfather died and the apache arrived from a long absence for his funeral. All the son-in-law's companions gathered in the room to wake the corpse, and when the lid of the coffin had been nailed on they brought absinthe and used the lid of the coffin as the zinc bar of a café, placing their glasses on it. The more honest people in the house were shocked but were too afraid to do anything. My mother, aware that Émile was the only one not to fear the devil, was in a great state lest he should seek out the apache who would have met his fists with a concealed knife and possibly murdered him, but nothing happened, and when the funeral was over Mme Choblais and her children paraded in the market-place in mourning clothes.

As I was five my mother decided I should go to school. There was a stone and wood building at the end of our road on which she had read: 'Protestant School for Girls, Infants' School, School for Boys.' On 1st October my mother, having plaited my long hair, led me by the hand to the infants' school. I was crying and she also was near to it. A large woman came to speak to my mother, put an arm round my waist, and led me to a schoolroom with a pine-board floor in the middle of which there was a black stove surrounded by a tall railing. The mistress began by teaching us a prayer, but I had no comprehension of the sense, never having heard until then the name of Jesus. We were then taught how to sing a hymn. I continued to sob quietly. A young woman came to inquire why I was unhappy. I answered that I was not unhappy but I was alone. 'Alone?' she queried. 'But what about all these other children?' At midday I handed the penny my mother had given me to the mistress for lunch. We had soup and rice pudding. Afterwards we played in the courtyard till four.

When I came home I made straight for my toys, having the idea that during my short absence everything would have changed, all that I cared for would have disappeared. My treasures appeared at first much as I had left them but when, running to my doll's bed, I discovered that in the place of my doll my small brother had deposited his white rabbit with the red eyes, I

imagined myself dispossessed and became so angry and injurious that my mother, having noticed nothing unusual, was wide-eyed. I explained as clearly as possible, because of the tears running down to my lips, what had happened, and she took my side, scolding my brother; but this in turn so affected me that I put his rabbit back in my doll's bed though insisting that the doll should lie with it.

I had little time to accustom myself to the infants' school. I learnt by heart the hymn beginning:

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,  
Look upon a little child.

Matilda sang it while she sewed. My baby brother also learnt to lisp it. I was on the point of being taught the Christmas hymns when I was taken with a sore throat, and then a headache and a fever. Émile went in the middle of the night to fetch a four-wheeler beyond the gate in the fortifications, and when I had been wrapped up in a blanket I was taken to the Hérald Hospital suffering from diphtheria.

For several days I was in danger. I used to see the whiteness of my mother's face through the glass partition, her eyes red with crying, her brave but unconvincing smile. Émile also had a whiteness about his skin, and his long moustaches could not keep still. He was made to put on a surgeon's white coat and this new manner of dressing intrigued me. My small brother on these visits was left in the care of the hospital porter. After a few moments my parents blew me a last kiss and departed, leaving some small gifts which a nurse would later bring and put on my bed, and the fun of opening these things repressed the tears which usually started to well up at the sight of their emotion and sad going away.

I was later moved to a room which faced the kitchens, and as I was better and consequently thought only of food I had the satisfaction of watching the cooks, dressed in blue blouses, stacking the red copper cauldrons full of hot soup on the trolleys for distribution in the wards. Our meals were arranged in this way. Our usual nurse would place an empty plate in front of each patient. One of the blue-coated cooks would then put into it a full ladle of raw horse-flesh, minced fine, upon which a second cook would pour the soup. There were mashed potatoes also which, if I remember accurately, came later as a separate course.

On what was to be my last night in hospital I was unable to sleep, and in my restlessness listened for the first time to the noise of the street, the rumbling carts, and the tired tread of the cab horses. When, next morning, my mother arrived with my clothes the ward sister told her that I had scarlet fever. She came to see me the next day but I was far too ill to recognize her. Later she came on Thursday alone, and on Sundays with Émile. In due course I was again ready to leave hospital but so enfeebled by these two serious illnesses that the doctors were for sending me to a convalescent home in the country, being of the opinion that lack of proper care at this stage might permanently affect me; but my parents wanted their daughter back at home immediately, and so, wan and much taller, I returned to Clichy.

The Sunday after my return, Marie-Thérèse, her husband, and Rolande came to lunch and I was much petted. Life appeared to me new and wonderful, and during the ensuing week my mother, laying aside her blouses, occasionally took us for a walk which she had never done up to now. Another Sunday had not passed, however, before my small brother, feeling listless and not inclined to play, became at the approach of night feverish, and my parents, leaving me asleep in bed, hurried him to the Bretonneau Hospital where they learned that the serum he had been given at the time of my first illness not having taken, he now had diphtheria with complications.

There followed a series of pitiful visits to see him behind his glass partition. Meningitis set in and the ward sister exclaimed to my mother: 'Ah, madame, he is very young for two such serious illnesses!' But soon pneumonia arrived also. When, after this, my mother came back from seeing him, she said tearfully that his forehead was full of bleeding wounds from throwing his poor head against the iron bars of the cot.

We were in December. My mother's birthday was on the twelfth and with her still beautiful waist and magnificent red hair she was only twenty-six. That morning she hurried up the stairs of the hospital, anxious, hoping. A hand was placed gently on her arm and she was led to a bare room where her son lay dead on a marble slab. He had died in the night far from her.

My grandmother from Blois came for the funeral, and as my little brother had died at the Bretonneau he was buried in the vast cemetery of St. Ouen.

My mother's resignation had been strained beyond her capacity to bear, and when she left the service her revolt was immense. Her suffering was so acute that it is a wonder she did not die. I became a silent witness of it when for entire afternoons she would howl with pain, like a she-wolf barking, or again, her head in her hands, her whole frail body would shake with heaving sobs. Every day we found something fresh to increase her misery. My brother's grey cat, the stray he had befriended, miauling for him, not knowing he was dead. There were nails, stolen from Émile, he had clumsily but strongly hammered into chairs or furniture, pieces of clothing, tiny trousers whose pockets revealed pebbles and bits of string, a purse with a halfpenny in it, and, of course, worst of all, the rabbit with the red eyes.

My mother burned the rabbit but devoutly put away the sailor's cap with the red tuft which he had so often worn. How dreadful for the little girl who remained, who neither dared to cry nor to play but was obliged to look on silently at all this early sorrow. Things became less strained when Émile arrived. There was supper. People spoke. Émile worked too hard, did not have the time to be so occupied with the one thought, and yet he felt it cruelly. The tears women shed appear natural. Those of a man are too terrible to be renewed. Émile did not cry after the funeral but he grew old. My mother would have ended by killing herself if it had not been for me. My parents could not have brought me back after my illness to a more destructive atmosphere, and I now began to show signs of the grievous deterioration in health which the doctors at Hérald had feared, so that my mother was torn from her grief to combat the violent fevers which took hold of me after the slightest cold.

Every Thursday afternoon my mother took me to the Boulevard Haussmann to deliver her blouses to Mme Gaillard who was also very unhappy; for though her business continued to go well and her husband was in the Auvergne, her eldest son was in the worst stage of tuberculosis and she could not even say to herself: 'It will all be for him.' The cruel doorkeeper had just lost his wife and sat sadly on his low chair not daring to go into the lodge, and Mme Gaillard, touched by pity, had taken the habit of putting out her stock a little earlier each morning to have time to tidy up his lodge and put a stew on the fire. He saw his wife everywhere. Seated on his chair, a rug round his thin legs, he



looked like a cab driver who had mislaid his horses. Anxious not to lose his situation of *concierge*, he would get up after the postman had brought the letters and he had examined them all carefully back and front, to deliver them to his various tenants.

For me the Boulevard Haussmann was an enchantment. The Magasin du Printemps gave away coloured balloons and similar toys to the children of their customers every Thursday afternoon. It was for this reason, I think, that my mother chose this particular day to deliver her work to Mme Gaillard and she was able to qualify as a customer by buying at this magnificent store the many yards of fine net which she needed to line her blouses as well as the mother-of-pearl buttons with which to finish them.

The following Thursday we were informed by our friend the porter that Mme Gaillard had gone to bury her husband in the Auvergne. The next Thursday she was not yet back, and as my mother had finished all the work in hand she decided to take advantage of this lull in her sewing to wash a great many things, and on the Saturday night, having tied up all the dirty linen in the largest bedsheet, we went together, for by now I accompanied her everywhere, to the famous public wash-house in the Boulevard Victor-Hugo.

A number was attached to the bundle, its counterpart being given to the owner, and the attendant, armed like a halberdier with a tall pole, then threw the bundle into the centre of an immense copper in which the linen bubbled and boiled. The next day the bundle, plainly numbered, would be found on an iron trolley, and then my mother would take her place in the long line of kneeling women who, their sleeves rolled up, their bodies moving rhythmically, scrubbed and soaked in the limpid water.

I loved this wash-house because we walked on planks under which the water lapped and gurgled. Women of all worlds came here, from the most vulgar to the most respectable, who quickly struck up wash-house acquaintanceship. Waiters from the neighbouring cafés moved deftly amongst us selling buttered rolls, *croissants*, hot coffee, and glasses of rum, but those who did the brisk business were the fortune-tellers who interpreted the future in the lines of wet palms that smelt agreeably of soap and disinfectant. These fortune-tellers were never for a moment idle. Even those women who pretended not to believe in them

soon gave way. One would see them getting up from the water with loud laughs or nervous tittering, wiping their hands on their rough aprons before going over to the gipsies, and then believing everything they were told. There were other ambulating vendors who passed through this picturesque crowd giving the place the colour and movement of an Eastern bazaar, dark-skinned men who sold scrubbing brushes, iron handles, beeswax, and even toilet soap and cheap perfumes. When the linen was rinsed one would make up the clean bundle, pushing it on the iron trolley to the drying-machine, where for a penny one could get rid of the water, or at least a good deal of it, which made the bundle much lighter to carry home. Later when the linen was hung up in our yard I would love to run between the sheets, playing at being the little girl lost or pursued in an imaginary city of white towers.

My mother had met in the wash-house an Italian woman called Francesca who invited my mother to call on her the next day. Still young and extremely pretty, Francesca lodged with her jealous husband and her three children over a courtyard near the Boulevard Victor-Hugo where, from morning till night, she made pleated skirts. She was so quick and clever that money came easily. Her husband, Julio, Italian also, was a roadmaker which at that time, at any rate in France, was a highly skilled and excellently paid profession. Francesca and Julio had come separately from Italy, he to work on the roads, she as a waitress. They had met and married in Paris, and with their joint economies had bought a little café-bar in Montmartre where they would have prospered had it not been for Julio's fits of dark jealousy which made him accuse her of being light-hearted with the customers. For long she endured these melancholy quarrels, but at last, driven almost mad herself, she left him, pregnant of her second child. He, distraught with love, finding her again after days and nights of searching, successfully obtained her pardon for the abominable scenes he had made, but as he could not stand the thought of her returning behind the café-bar, and of being racked himself by doubts and sufferings, he obliged her to sell their business at a low price and look for accommodation elsewhere. Another child was born and poverty came in at the door. Francesca started to do a little housework for the neighbours, but as soon as a place suited her Julio imagined some fresh

lover, and at night the walls of their lodging shook with his threats. She accordingly decided that only a cloistered life could save her from this persecution. Thus, young and pretty, surrounded by her children, she pedalled all day on her sewing-machine without ever an opportunity to see a new face or to exchange an intelligent thought. She gave my mother a few lessons in skirt-making, and henceforth we went to her lodging every afternoon, my mother to sew on hooks, to stop seams, and verify the work before it was delivered, and I, at last, to play with the two little girls, Maria and Francine, of my own age. The third child, a boy, was still in his cot.

One evening Julio brought home with him a young paviour newly arrived from Italy and who could not yet speak any French. The next day Julio introduced him to the foreman of his gang who gave him a week's wages in advance so that he could find a room in one of those many small hotels which at that time abounded at Clichy. Giovanni loved children, and was delighted, having left his brothers and sisters in Piedmont, to renew the calm satisfaction of family life by frequenting Julio's crowded lodging. A few days later, Julio coming home earlier than usual, saw Giovanni's good-looking features bent over the lips of his wife. He closed the door quietly and said nothing, but henceforth there was such an ugly look about him that Francesca had no more peace. The next evening Julio, returning home drunk, threatened her with a revolver. That night, as soon as he was asleep, she made a parcel of her things and, leaving husband and children, went to a cheap hotel, hired a sewing-machine, and continued to make her pleated skirts.

We had been warned by Francesca of these happenings in a letter, and my mother and I went to the new address where we found Francesca entirely occupied with her romance, Giovanni having followed her. She showed no sorrow at being parted from her children, but mightily afraid that her husband might discover her whereabouts, for which reason she never left her room, persuading my mother to deliver her skirts to the wholesaler. We even bought her thread and the daily provisions.

One morning when we had arrived very early at Francesca's, my mother, having given me a hot *croissant* she had bought on the way at the baker's for my breakfast, left me alone with her friend whilst she went off to collect a new bundle of skirts. I

remember looking up from the enjoyment of my warm pastry to see Francesca, who had a long, sharp knife in her hand apparently engaged in cutting a slice of bread, turn round on her heels, throw up her arms, and collapse on the floor, the knife clattering on the boards. I was terrified and remained helplessly pinned to my place. Francesca did not move and nor could I. At last the door opened and my mother arrived. I threw myself into her arms, sobbing. My mother, who on such occasions kept admirably calm, gently lifted up Francesca who lay in a pool of blood, and arranged for her to be taken in a cab to the Beaujon Hospital. As her condition was extremely serious, Julio was sent for. He tore to her bedside, again asking forgiveness of this too young wife who had nearly died of a miscarriage.

She returned in a very weak state to her husband and children in their lodging near the boulevard and resumed her occupations as if nothing unusual had happened; and as Mme Gaillard was now back at her stand in the Boulevard Haussmann, my mother was glad to exchange skirt-making for the creation of her lovely blouses. We continued on Saturdays to see Francesca at the wash-house. Her accident had aged her and she was beginning to lose her beauty. One day Julio said to her: 'I've put some money aside. What do you think? Shall we take another café-bar?'

'Not with a jealous fellow like you. It wouldn't be possible!' she answered.

Julio looked through her with the sharpness of a dagger and answered: 'See yourself as I see you, Francesca. I've no longer any need to be jealous!'

# 6

T
 HERE was a little old woman from the Auvergne who brought Mme Gaillard the lace she made on a spindle. This Mme Valentin would attend the various markets round Paris, selling exclusively the laces of her native province, and it was during her idle moments, sitting by her wares, that she made the lace she sold Mme Gaillard.

More in width than in height, toothless, and wearing a black woollen shawl over her sparse grey hair, she had been introduced to my mother by Mme Gaillard thus: 'Mme Valentin also lives at Clichy. You ought to go to see her. She has all the lace you need to make your blouses, and if you had known each other when I was in the Auvergne burying my husband you could have gone on working, and I shouldn't be without a blouse in my box. It's a wonder my customers haven't gone somewhere else.'

These last two words were accompanied by a dramatic pointing to the opposite side of the street and a mysterious drop in the voice, alluding to the resplendant Ville du Puy, the prettiest lace shop in Paris which Mme Gaillard liked to consider her only rival.

Giving up our usual visit to the store where I was given a coloured balloon, we went back to Clichy with Mme Valentin, who said to my mother as we neared home: 'Suppose you come to my place a moment? I would show you my lace, and you would know where I live, and sometimes you could take my work to Mme Gaillard, for I'm getting old and tired.'

We followed Mme Valentin, delighted to find she was leading us so much in our own direction, but this was only part of our surprise, for soon she entered the garden where our lilac grew, and we discovered she lived only one house away from ours.

She had an immense bed with red curtains which came from the Auvergne and in which she had had thirteen children! On

the table, covered with a red carpet, was a great quantity of lace in the various stages of its making, reels of cotton, spindles, and pins with different coloured heads as well as a sheaf of designs on pink cardboard. Quite a number of different laces were begun, emerging from the 'cushions,' and she explained that she would change from one to the other, according to the urgency of the order, with the same ease; but never did she waste her time, and I noticed that she never looked at the work she was doing except, occasionally, when she altered the arrangement of the pins, and in this way there came out from between her delicate fingers, browned, veined, and bent with age, yards upon yards of snow-white lace of pure design.

She was Mme Gaillard's most treasured lacemaker and, quite unable to read or write, had apparently been born with the gift of lacemaking in her fingers, exercising them, making them nimble, whilst she watched the geese or the sheep in her native Auvergne, and looking at me with her kind, tired eyes, she said: 'Little girl, when I was your age, I had already made enough purl to go all round my village!' This purl being the first and easiest lace one is given to do. Then turning to Mme Gaillard's shop and our introduction, she continued: 'I am very glad that you live so near to me. I had already noticed you, Mme Gal, on Thursday afternoons in the Boulevard Haussmann. Your beautiful hair and the little girl made me want to know you. I must teach Madeleine to use her fingers.'

Of the thirteen children Mme Valentin had in the red-curtained bed only four survived, three married daughters and a son. Her daughter Augustine, dark-haired, lazy, often drunk, was married to a paviour and lived in the house opposite our own from which she seldom emerged, the effort of going down the stairs being too much for her. The children slept, dressed, ate, went to school, and came back from it by a series of miracles as if they belonged to nobody. They played in the street and were supremely happy.

Léa, the second daughter, lived with her children in a shack built by her husband on a piece of waste ground. This house, shaped like a mushroom, had a tall chimney surmounted by what looked like a mandarin's hat. The children were as happy as the day was long, having a large field to play in, no neighbours, and no *concierge* to worry them. The parents worked hard and were fond

of each other. I used to discover Léa, a towel round her head like a turban, sorting out rags thrown away by the textile factories. She arranged these marvels in separate piles—cotton, silk, and wool for her husband to pack tightly into box-shaped bundles and deliver to the papermakers at Levallois. We would go with him, he so gentle and kind, harnessed to his hand-cart like a scraggy horse, we either in it or trotting beside him.

Léa knew that I loved bits of silk and satin, and put aside for me the prettiest and brightest which I excitedly took home to turn into dresses and hats for my dolls. Her eldest daughter helped us as soon as she came home from school and was already very clever at knowing the different materials at a touch.

Mme Valentin's third daughter, Léontine, was married to a terrible drunkard she simply adored. Her lovely eyes were sunk in a face studded with deep smallpox holes. My mother, recognizing her goodness and courage, admired her, and Léontine tried to comfort her, pointing out that there is always somebody more miserable than oneself.

Every other Sunday we lunched with Marie-Thérèse and her husband at their flat in the rue de Longchamps. The guests were the same, and if the conversation was apt to become more political as the weeks passed it invariably ended on dresses, hats, veils, and love. Hélène, still wholly attached to Raoul, told us with satisfaction that her husband, the doorkeeper, growing older, was becoming more reasonable, his jealousy taking on a less violent character, and he even granted her a little liberty, with the result that she was just now making the most delightful plans to go to Algiers, in appearance to visit her sister Germaine, but actually, of course, to take a sea trip with Raoul who, if he took a liking to the North African coast, could stay there for ever with his adoring mistress.

As the winter had been disastrous to my health, and because Marie-Thérèse was anxious also for her daughter Rolande to have a change of air, though she never had a cold and grew like a young oak, she suggested to my parents that she should take us both to Marais to stay with Ermeline's mother, Mme Brossier, who had looked after Rolande during that critical moment in her babyhood. She extended a similar invitation to Françoise, Hélène's astute eight-year-old daughter, who was no longer so necessary to her mother now that Hélène, less watched, could do

without an alibi. Ermeline, having earned enough money in Paris to make of herself an attractive match, had returned to Marais, and we three little girls were promised the fun of attending her marriage to a young farm worker who hoped, before long, to have some land of his own.

When Rolande, Françoise, and I set off with my aunt in the train not one of us children, I think, had a very clear idea of what a wheatfield looked like. And what a golden field was the one facing Mme Brossier's house! And what magnificent country! To find myself that evening in a fairy-tale house was an enchantment. My two companions, however, were too clever and wide awake for my simplicity. Françoise especially terrified me by her cunning, whilst Rolande, admired by her parents who applauded all she did, had developed an assurance that disconcerted me and obliged me in everything to acknowledge her supremacy.

My only ally was Yvonne, the bashful little thing from the poor-law administration, but though we spent many hours trying to hide behind haystacks and in long grass to enjoy the peace of our own thoughts, our tormentors always found us and bent us to their will.

Soon the wedding preparations began. The guests arrived in gigs and traps, grandmothers all in black with white bonnets and fat blue umbrellas, the men in farm blouses. Two bakers from the village came to make a three days' provision of bread and buns, kneading the flour on trestled tables on the grass, and as the cottage was much too small to accommodate so many people, white linen sheets with red roses pinned to them were stretched against the walls of the barn, and the roof disappeared under garlands of sweet-smelling flowers. The long tables were never cleared, the meal continuing for the three days and nights, with intervals merely for dancing and sleep. There was the wedding procession led by the fiddler, we four little girls holding up the bride's train all along the powdery road, the men wearing white flowers in their buttonholes and white cockades in their black hats, the women wearing their loveliest lace bonnets. Then, after three days of eating and dancing, the guests went off in their traps and gigs. Ermeline and her husband, Laurent, became the owners of the cottage. Esther, Mme Brossier's deaf and crippled sister, went off each morning, wound up in her grey



cape whose greyness seemed to reflect the colours of the sky, leaning on her stick, taking with her for pasture the goat, the turkeys, and the one cow Blanchette. When it was fine she made lingerie for the shops at Vierzon. When it rained she knitted long black stockings. Coming back to the cottage at night she put away her stick, and sitting in the huge fire-place merged with the blackness of the smoke-stained bricks. There, while we gathered round the large table, she would remain, her soup bowl on her knees, smacking her tongue as she drank, for being deaf she was unaware of the noise she made. She was goodness itself to us, but we, hiding in the hedges of the fields where she kept her animals, suddenly rushed out and surrounded her, obliging her to leave off what she was doing to follow us. She laughed toothlessly, exclaiming: 'Ah, ces pôques!' which meant: 'Ah, those little girls!' I was not very taken with this game, knowing how much it put her out, but I was obliged to follow suit.

On Sundays we went to mass at Menne-ton, Mme Brossier sitting out in the market-place beforehand to sell her butter and goat's cheese. She would then buy some cotton and a packet of salt and we would go into the old church, closing ourselves up in a seat with a door, and looking forward to the moment when, after mass, the priest and the uniformed beadle would pass down the aisle with a platter of bread or cake, offered every Sunday by a different parishioner, and which, before passing it round cut up into little squares, the priest would bless. Then we would go home along the white road, passing fields of corn and wheat or clover.

One Sunday afternoon, just like this, we found Marie-Thérèse waiting for us, and as we were to go back to Paris the same evening she put a tub of hot water on a chair in front of the cottage door and washed our heads. At the sight of the soap and water and at the idea we might lose our fleas, Mme Brossier, Esther, and Ermeline gesticulated like three witches, crying out that we should become deaf, if not lose our health altogether, and while they implored us, making the sign of the cross, my little friend Yvonne sought refuge under Mme Brossier's skirts.

We dried our long hair, playing for the last time in the wheat-field, picking marguerites, cornflowers, and poppies which have remained my favourite flowers, reminding me of that sweet

summer of 1913 when I became conscious, for the briefest moment, that there were other destinies than the sort of servitude my mother bowed down to with a mixture of bitterness and submission, never able to leave our miserable flat and the burning streets. Paris swallowed me up again. Almost immediately I caught an eruption on my gums. I could not eat but remained sobbing with pain. When I was cured my mother caught this strange disease and took to her bed for three days.

My father, having been invited to attend a banquet organized by his trade union, decided, because of my mother's indisposition, to take me. We set out very proudly, he in a grey alpaca suit and a straw hat, shaven close and wearing a tie, I in a white dress, white linen shoes, and an adorable hat of Italian straw, soft and full of graceful curves, and decorated with field flowers which splashed it with colour.

He held me by the hand. I buried mine in his. For a little girl to walk out with her father is an exquisite thing. She does not fear to tell him she is tired, or hungry, or thirsty, or even to suggest, when passing in front of a shop, that it is high time she had a hand-bag; he is sure to believe her. The little woman who sleeps in every little girl tries out her charm and persuasion first on her father. My mother would have been too well aware that I was almost bound, if she gave me a hand-bag, to lose it the first day in the underground; that so short a walk for me, who played in the streets all day, was insufficient to make me tired; and that hunger and thirst were sensations that had no business to be felt outside meal times and must, at all costs, be discouraged.

My mother was very quickly forgotten. The banquet was a fine sight with the long tables, the tricolour flags grouped together, four differently shaped glasses at the side of each plate, and what a magnificent thing it was to be seated next to my father, to see him happy, not haunted, expecting some withering remark, but at ease, expectant, greedy for the meal and the companionship of men who were friendly and sometimes admiring. Soon I heard him speaking in patois, warming up, emptying his glasses and mine. I took my pleasure silently, eating abundantly to make up for the days when, at home, there was not enough food or, if enough, the wrong kind for a little girl. I thought everything delicious. There were cakes and coffee, and a fat, flushed individual climbed on a platform and, having made a

speech, began to call out the names of people who were to come up for medals and prizes.

After a time my father's name broke upon us stridently. I felt him start with surprise, look round a trifle lost, and then bend under the table in an effort to put on his shoes which he had thrown off at the height of the repast, not normally accustomed to having them on at meals. All the company took a lively interest in poor Émile's predicament, but he, laughing, and still unable to get his shoes on, took me by the hand, and in his socks led me brazenly to the platform while the company applauded and his special friends urged him on in patois. He was given a medal, though for what reason I am not clear, and I a savings book with a five-franc piece. When we were back at our places my father succeeded in putting on his shoes and we left the banquet. Half-way along the boulevard he bought a pair of linen shoes, tying his heavy ones by the laces and throwing them over a shoulder, and thus, his straw hat thrown well back on his forehead, he took me home in happy mood.

My mother who had had a hæmorrhage during our absence was very pale. As in my case the illness was coming to an end most painfully. My father told her all about our exploits. She could see by his bright cheeks that he had drunk abundantly. He told her how much I had enjoyed myself. My mother answered acidly that whilst we had been having such a good time the people in the flat above had also had a banquet in honour of a baptism, and that, of course, nobody had given a thought to her, though she had been unable to eat a morsel all day!

ON the first floor of our house lived Marguerite Rosiers, her husband, Hyacinthe, and their little girl, Lucienne.

My mother's friendship with Marguerite started by her watching this woman going off in the morning, a scarf round her hair and a black osier basket, presumably containing her lunch, under an arm. My mother wondered who she was and where she was going. Occasionally Marguerite would come back in the evening with Mme Maillard, her mother, but more often Mme Maillard would arrive first and, not having the key, would wait on the landing. After several occasions when my mother would have invited her in if she had dared, Mme Maillard knocked at our door and, introducing herself, asked to sit down till her daughter came home.

Mme Maillard had followed the picturesque profession of baker's delivery woman, or bread-carrier, as the French say, which was so cruelly hard that only the most miserable women in Paris would consent to such abasement. Curled up in a corner with my doll I liked to hear her say how she was up at four weighing the long loaves and placing them in the panniered carriage which she wheeled over the cobbled roads, pushing with all her might when she climbed towards Montmartre, retaining the vehicle against her flanks during the descent. The light, crisp French loaves were ranged like little soldiers standing up. One saw but their golden heads. The heavy loaves, especially the four-pounders, were stacked horizontally, and each had the little extra piece to make up the exact weight, attached to the top with a steel pin so that they looked like sleeping humpty-dumpties with top-hats.

Though the work was grossly underpaid, bread-carriers could take home what bread they needed for their own families, and often a few stale *croissants* if any were left unsold from the previous

day. At the New Year their customers gave them sixpence or a piece of worn clothing.

The work finished at eleven after which most of the women did something else. A few made mattresses, others, like Mme Maillard, ironed for a laundry. Mme Maillard had been so much on her tired legs that she could no longer stand for more than a few minutes at a time. That is why she had knocked at our door.

My mother was delighted to have somebody to talk to, and Mme Maillard seemed happy to recount the details of her life. She had been a widow for a long time; indeed her daughter Marguerite was born just after her husband's death. My mother, who always liked to compare husbands, asked what hers had been like, and Mme Maillard answered that he had been a cruel and dissolute drunkard who went away every few months, came back to give her a thrashing, and then disappeared again.

One day whilst she was pregnant with Marguerite, but still working at the bread because she needed the money, she was told that her husband was in hospital. After finishing her rounds she went to see him. He was terribly ill and his mistress was there sitting on the edge of his bed. Maillard was furious to see his wife; the mistress insulted her. She left under a hail of language.

Her bosom heaving with indignation, she recounted the scene to her friends at the bakery. Mme Malgras, the owner, a person of strong will who kept both her business and her husband on a tight rein, exclaimed: 'My poor Adèle, do you know what I would do? I'd throw a bottle of vitriol in his face.' The other women gave similar advice. They offered to procure pepper or vitriol according to her choice. In the end it was decided to give her a bag of finely ground pepper.

Mme Maillard again found her husband in the company of his mistress. The mistress laughed at Mme Maillard's pregnancy, asking who in the world might be the father. At this Mme Maillard took the pepper bag out of her pocket and threw the contents at the woman, who filled the hospital with her yells.

Mme Maillard did not wait for the consequences. She fled. Two days later her husband died. Marguerite was born a sickly child, having inherited her mother's tired blood and her father's unhealthiness. She grew up neither much stronger nor at all

pretty, but she had a little money which, at the death of an uncle, a market gardener at Argentan, was divided equally between her and her sisters. Lucie, one of the sisters, married an officer in the regular army. Marguerite used her dowry to marry an extremely good-looking young man who worked at a hosier's. Beautifully dressed, he looked like a wax figure in his shop. Unknown to Marguerite he was violently in love with another woman, and she discovered too late that he had simply married her for her dowry. She inspired him with such physical repulsion that he never consummated the marriage. He fell ill, raved deliriously about the other woman, and died within two months from galloping consumption, leaving Marguerite a widow, a virgin, and modestly rich.

She lived alone in her tiny flat. She worked on weekdays, but on Sunday she dreamed behind the geranium pots on her window-sill.

She had no particular aspirations, just wanting to live for herself, selfishly. Meanwhile Mme Maillard had become the cashier at her bakery.

One Sunday, after Marguerite had washed her hair and was doing a little mending, feeling satisfied, gently wondering if her mother would come to see her that afternoon so that they could go for a little walk to see the new buildings being erected along the Seine, as was their custom on Sunday afternoons, she looked up and saw a young man staring at her from the opposite window. She was annoyed because her long hair was streaming down her back and she had not put on her corset. The idea that she was being watched upset the contentment of doing just as she pleased in her little room behind the barrier of bright geraniums. The next Sunday he looked at her again and even smiled. Offended, she closed the windows, but an hour later, the room becoming too warm, she was obliged to reopen them.

For a few days her opposite neighbour, who was very shy, suffering from this window virtually banged in his face, did not dare show himself, but soon, in the evenings, she began to hear love songs scratched on a violin; and as he became braver his fiddling figure became discernible behind the curtains, and though she could not see his eyes she guessed they must be turned in her direction. Languid and romantic tunes now crossed the frontier of geraniums each time she came home and, in due

course, the doorkeeper who, like all doorkeepers, knew everything, began to let drop the nicest things about young M. Rosier who was so serious and economical, and worked in a bank. Then one day Marguerite met him on the stairs and they went for a walk under the flowering chestnut-trees in the Avenue des Fêtes. They were married and two years later Lucienne was born.

The many visits which Mme Maillard made us naturally led to us being introduced to Marguerite who, in turn, confided a good deal in my mother, saying with a wry smile that she had not been lucky in love, her first husband not wanting to have anything to do with her, and Hyacinthe, her second, being so awkward in this art that she often wondered if Lucienne's arrival was not due to a miracle. After this confidence my mother and she laughed, forgetting my silent presence.

Marguerite had had a milk-fever after the birth of her daughter. Too run down to feed the baby, unable to get rid of her milk, she was still the victim of severe bouts of neurasthenia which quite changed her normally gentle disposition. She no longer went out to work as she had done at the beginning when my mother and I used to watch her setting forth in the morning with a scarf round her hair and a basket under her arm, but we so often began to hear little Lucienne crying in the flat, sometimes for many hours, if not the whole day, that in the end my mother decided to investigate. She found the door ajar, the baby screaming in her cot, but otherwise nobody in the flat, and thinking that Marguerite must have been called away suddenly, my mother took little Lucienne in her arms and brought her to our place.

Some days passed before we discovered what happened to Marguerite when she so mysteriously disappeared, but as my mother and she became closer friends the tragedy of her broken health and hallucinations became our everyday preoccupation.

Marguerite, torn at intervals by cerebral anaemia, became mad with fear at the sight or sound of horses. When through her window she saw the brewery cart coming down our street, she was convinced that it was not a brewery cart but a van from the mad-house, and that jailers were arriving to lock her up. Her instinct was immediately to hide, anywhere, in a cupboard, under the bed. She must have been hidden in this way when my mother, hearing the baby cry, had first entered her flat, but now having complete

confidence in us, she would, at the first sound of the brewery cart, rush down to deposit Lucienne in our care, and then throw herself into the most convenient hiding-place. A van drawn by four horses used to draw up on certain days outside the grocer's, and as long as it was there poor Marguerite, her teeth chattering, would not emerge from behind our curtains. The trouble was that the driver of this particular van had a habit, after discharging his merchandise, of going off to lunch, leaving the van where it stood, the horses enjoying their nosebags. One heard the hoofs beating against the cobble-stones, the bells on the harness ringing, the horses neighing quietly, friendly, familiar sounds which normally merged into the other noises of the street. Eventually the driver would come out of the café, climb into his high seat, take his whip, making it sing in the air, and urge off his horses. The heavy cart would shudder over the cobbles, shaking the houses, then gradually die away. Then our curtains would move, and Marguerite, serene again, quite normal, would exclaim with pitiful relief: 'They must have spent the best part of three hours looking for me, what do you say, Mme Gal?' After which, gathering up her baby, she would leave us to make her husband's supper.

My mother, wise and experienced, had much pity for her friend, and aware that Marguerite's attacks of madness might if talked about by the neighbours do her a great deal of harm, encouraged her always to come to us when she was afraid.



MY father had discovered, during the course of the banquet we had attended together, that his friends from the *midi* travelled regularly between Paris and the place of their birth on cheap railway tickets obtained for them by their member of parliament. This information came back to his mind when his sister, Mme Agnel, wrote saying that as my health appeared so poorly he should send me for at least part of the winter to their cottage at the Grand' Combe where I could regain my strength in the sunshine.

The Comte de Ramel, our deputy, having given us the necessary railway tickets, my father decided to take me there, and my mother, not without tears, packed my clothes in a basket together with my dolls, my bits of material, my scissors, blunt at the ends, my coloured silks, and some Italian straw which Marie-Thérèse brought me from her workshop.

We took the night train from the Gare de Lyon. My father and I each ate a hard-boiled egg after which he put his legs up and went to sleep. I remember nothing else about the journey except arriving at Nîmes where we took a slow train for the Grand' Combe.

Mme Agnel, or my Aunt Eugénie as I learnt to call her, and her husband, Ernest, had built their pretty house on the flank of a rocky cliff, and the road up to it was so precipitous that the roofs of the houses looked as if they had been made to fit into each other. At this hour of the morning when my father and I, hand in hand, climbed it together, all the women of the street were on their doorsteps, each holding a large bowl of black coffee, talking from door to door in the sonorous, golden patois of those parts. I had not thought it possible that an entire village could speak just like my father. I told him my surprise. He laughed, happy to understand everything the women said, and put out his chest with pride.

At the top of the road the last house was built crossways. Above that the mountain rose toweringly. What a house! A little gate, half hidden under a vine bower, led to it up ascending

steps of garden in which tomatoes splashed their red, and grapes, ripe for picking, filled the warm air with their sweet perfume. One did not come immediately upon the house, new delights keeping one, at every fresh climb, in suspense. There was a sylvan antechamber, for instance, with russet tiles and walls of vine, walls that curved upwards to form a dome from which hung the fruit tantalizingly so that those who sat round the table on which, as we approached, a big cat was asleep, could raise their arms and pick their dessert warmed by the sun.

At this moment a rather portly woman appeared and at the sight of my father threw her arms up, exclaiming: 'Ah, my own Milou! It's you!' Then, smiling so happily that all her face seemed bathed in sunshine: 'How happy I am! And this is your *pitchbounette*, your little girl! How pale she is, but real *poulide*!' (This word, I discovered later, means pretty in patois.) 'Take off your coat, my Milou. Make yourself comfortable and taste a glass of our wine. It's not too bad, I think. Ernestine! Ernestine! Your Uncle Milou is here! Come quickly and see him!'

A beautiful girl of eighteen, dark, and a real pleasure to look at, came out swinging her hips, and having kissed my father, looked at me unbelievably because of my fair hair, remarking upon it rather sarcastically to her mother in patois which I easily understood, having picked up many of the words at home, and even more importantly, the intonation, so that I read clearly into her thoughts. As a peace offering, and to make up for the misfortune of being so blonde, I immediately opened my osier basket and produced the magnificent lace blouse which my mother, at great cost, had made for her niece, intending thus to repay at least part of their hospitality. The blouse was much admired but my aunt still had it in her hands, complimenting my mother on her skill, when the most curious sound, hollow and rhythmical, caused my father to look inquiringly in the direction of the house, upon which Ernestine remarked: 'Té! But that's only your Aunt Marie, the doddering thing, who claps her hands all day to keep warm. We don't take any more notice.'

'Aunt Marie!' exclaimed my father, rushing indoors.

He came out, holding the frail creature in his wiry arms, smothering her with kisses, she, thin, wrinkled like a dried fruit, clothed dismally in black. Last link for my father and Eugénie with their paternal family, she was being looked after by Eugénie

in return for her fortune when she was dead. Not that Aunt Marie had much money, doubtless not more than a few pieces of gold, but she owned four great cupboards, made of walnut and barded, filled with sweet-smelling linen which the old lady kept locked up, determined not to part with it until she had to. She was taking a most unconscionable time leaving this earth, forgotten by death, unheeded by the family in whose house she had become merely a piece of creaking furniture. Her food was taken to her, and she spent the day dragging herself backwards and forwards between her arm-chair and her close-stool; in the evening Eugénie came to help her undress and go to bed.

Now, hot and happy tears were rolling down her withered cheeks, and one would have said that his kisses were making her live again. His immense tenderness in talking to her, his gentleness in putting her down, filled me with wonderment, and I looked at my father almost as if I had never seen him before.

Ernestine took me indoors to show me round the house and to take me up to her room which I was to share with her. The transition from the arbour was so sudden that my eyes, blinded with strong light, could scarcely distinguish anything in the shuttered rooms and cool obscurity. In Ernestine's room, for instance, I noticed little but the comfortable softness of the large bed. Peeping into my Aunt Eugénie's the beds had curtains. My great surprise was the abundance of linen, of a quality I had never seen, which gave the rooms a cosy richness, an odoriferous well-being, like bees in a flower garden. In this house were gathered all the treasures owned by the many victims of the mushroom feast. Half the inheritance had been my father's who proudly abandoned his share, a fact which, when my mother was led to speak of it, choked her with indignation.

We lunched in the arbour, under the cool vine, on fried aubergines, an admirable dish of tomatoes, and beans which all the morning had simmered in earthenware pots over a charcoal fire and which were served to us in those same pots, blackened by the fire. The meal was flavoured throughout by the olive oil in which the aubergines were fried, garlic, and pepper. We picked the grapes from our verdant walls and drank hot black coffee. My aunt tried to make me conform to the usual siesta, but I was too excited, too anxious to push my inquiring nose along the narrow steps of this precipitous garden burning in an undimmed

sun, and soon I came upon the kitchen garden and all its attendant wonders, lettuces, peas, tomatoes, rabbit hutches, a hen house, and a dovecot, all against a magnificent stone wall not built to protect this little kingdom from thieves but from the face of the mountain, lest it should crumble and carry away the house and garden. My Uncle Ernest kept the closest watch on this wall for a possible crack, for I learnt afterwards that it was his constant fear to find the mountain coming in through the drawing-room window. The vines fought to cover up the wall, for they were everywhere and the grapes so profuse that before I was there long I learnt to give succulent bunches to the rabbits and to the hens who enjoyed the pips. Beyond the wall the mountain towered omnipotent, studded with pines and tufts of heather which gave a special aroma to the honey. Occasionally some old woman, wearing a wide black straw hat, would climb up the mountain, her steps silent on the carpet of dead pine-needles. First one would merely see the cone of her hat and hear the sound of her mumbling voice. Then one would see her brown, veined hand, her stick, and the goat she was leading by a string and with whom she did not cease to converse.

At the other end of the garden there was a deep water tank let into the rock and covered with a slab of cement over which, when one walked, one's steps echoed deliciously. An old-fashioned pump with a creaking handle brought up the cool, clear water. Two pails filled with it hung in the sun to warm. My Aunt Eugénie, I discovered later, was convinced that the slab would give way under her weight and precipitate her into the echoing cavern, and it became my joy to watch her skirting round it like a large and cautious cat.

I played in this garden happily till past six when the gate opened and a little man, black from his cap to his boots, arrived, and at the sound of his steps on the gravel everybody in the house flew out to meet him. His teeth, sparkingly white, shone when he smiled. He shook hands with us all, threw his cap on the table, and sitting down in the arbour began to take his boots off. This was my Uncle Ernest. He proceeded to strip to the waist whilst his wife and daughter filled a tub with the two pails of warm water I had seen hanging out in the sun. He plunged his head and shoulders in the water, scrubbed himself energetically with a large cake of Marseilles soap, and finally emerged as clean as

clean. His wife stood by holding a large towel in her hands. My uncle put his head a second time into the tub and bringing it out all running with water received the towel from my aunt. The tub was lifted from the two chairs on which it had reposed and placed gently on the ground. Then my uncle sat on one of the chairs and put his feet into the tub. Finally, having dried himself, slipped on a pair of white linen shoes and a clean shirt, and combed his hair, he kissed his wife, his daughter, and then me. The brothers-in-law now gave each other the accolade and went off, arm in arm, to the village to take an *apéritif*. My father was eager to meet the men he had known in the mine. My uncle and he came home rather late that evening, and rather gay. The next morning my father went back to Paris.

I was immensely happy in my new family, being accustomed to play by myself. My favourite corner was in the kitchen garden, beside the rabbit hutches, where the vines and beans climbed up the wall whose russet brick divided us from the mountain flank. Here, shaded from the fierce sun, I stayed for hours, my aunt respecting the laws of hospitality, never obliging me to do anything in the house, not requiring me to go to the village, the bread being delivered every morning.

The baker's man harnessed himself to a little cart full of warm, country loaves and made his passage known by blowing into an old hunting horn. When the notes became increasingly loud I would run down to meet him where the road came to an end. Besides bringing the bread, he disseminated the day's news in patois so that there was always a great crowd of women round his cart which, as the loaves diminished, he filled up with tomatoes, grapes, and lettuces. The first days he spoke to me in French, but soon, taking me under his protection, calling me 'Milou's little girl,' he addressed me in patois which by then I understood perfectly, though I had trouble in speaking it.

My beautiful cousin, Ernestine, was unbelievably spoilt. When my Aunt Eugénie came to wake us in the morning she would help her daughter to dress, putting on her stockings. Ernestine's great trial was not living in the heart of the little town where her loveliness could have shone with more effect. She was always reproaching her parents for building a house so far from everything. What made the house so lovable to the parents caused the despair of their daughter.

Lazy and complaining, always in the shade to keep her skin white, she did not know what to do. She had not learnt enough at school to work in the offices of the mine, and a young person of her importance could not, without loss of face, accept anything less important. The shops in the Grand' Combe were tiny and mostly in family hands. My Uncle Ernest had a sister who was married to the owner of a café in the main square, and every Sunday after lunch Ernestine hurried off to spend the afternoon with her cousin Irma; not that she had any affection for her, but the café was the meeting-place of all the beaux in town. The Agnels were disappointed at their daughter going off on her own and they would have liked to go with her, but to do that they would have been obliged to leave their cool arbour and their much-loved house, and on Sunday afternoons my Aunt Eugénie knitted and my Uncle Ernest enjoyed wearing his linen shoes and smoking his pipe.

The first Sunday I was there Aunt Eugénie, having kissed us both good morning, prepared her daughter for church. When we finally set out my cousin was wearing a white pleated skirt, the lace blouse I had brought her from my mother, and a hat that made me laugh so rudely that my cheeks were wet with tears. Marie-Thérèse had not wasted her creations on my childish intelligence. At least I knew what a hat should look like and that, to be pretty, it must be light, and be, in the main, of a sober colour, that the flowers or feathers with which it is decked may have their vividness heightened. It was not my Parisian taste that was at fault but my politeness, or, to be exact, the lack of it. One can merely, as a child, pick up the faults and qualities of the home, and my mother's life was too raw and bitter to breed the niceties of speech and behaviour. There was also, at that moment, within me a pent-up resentment about what my cousin had said concerning my blonde hair. At any rate a demoniac gaiety rocked me at the sight of this apple-green basin, topped by a gigantic bow of cherry-coloured taffeta which needed, to keep it at all straight, a dozen hatpins, some, in this case, being decorated with imitation pearls, others with the heads of animals in cut glass, that stuck out in all directions like the arms of a windmill. As we went solemnly down the steep road, women, drinking their black coffee on their doorsteps, bade us good morning and then gaped with admiration at Ernestine's coloured pyramid.

The hat I wore that Sunday did not prove any more acceptable to Ernestine than hers was pleasing to me. One of three that Marie-Thérèse had made specially for my journey of pale blue linen (the others were white and rose), there was nothing to make people look at it but the freshness of the linen and its tender colour which harmonized with the pearly texture of my blonde skin. In Ernestine's estimation a hat without trimmings was a sign of poverty. She knew we were poor. The satin, the ribbons, and the pins of her edifice represented cash in the bank and the undeniable proof that her family was one of the most important and looked up to in the Grand' Combe. If I was ashamed of her country bumpkin taste she resented what she considered an outward sign of my poverty.

We all arrived outside the church in rather irritable mood, Ernestine specially, pulled about in her Sunday clothes, her hair tightly tied under her hat, her fingers sticky in gloves, and her black leather bag with the silver clasp overfilled with an enormous handkerchief. In her other hand she held her prayer book and rosary. We stayed a few minutes talking outside the porch, Ernestine looking for her cousin Irma and other particular friends, and becoming, on their arrival, suddenly gayer, more smiling, discussing the hats of the other girls, turning slowly from one side to the other to let everybody admire hers. When the bell rang and we went in the young men of the town, wearing white trousers, white linen shoes, and holding straw hats in awkward fingers, adroitly manœuvred themselves into the right position where they could offer the holy water to their loved ones.

This was the third occasion on which Ernestine had received the holy water from the moistened fingers of Louis Verdier, a blond young man, pale, distinguished-looking, but rather lacking in colour amongst so many turbulent, gesticulating companions, speaking in the street in high tones, boiling over with vigorous enthusiasms.

Some of Ernestine's friends made fun of her ascetic young man, but in a kindly way, for he was rich and of a much considered family, and the other girls would have been delighted to become the object of his attentions. He was particularly bold on this Sunday morning and sat beside us. After the service, probably to court Ernestine in a roundabout way, he said the nicest things to me, and in such a calm, gentle voice that I was quite overcome.

We were to lunch with Irma's parents and Ernestine was smiling, for not only would she be spared the climb home up the mountain during the hottest part of the day, but she would spend an animated afternoon. On the way from the church to the café Ernestine and Irma walked in front. Louis Verdier, who had stayed a little behind with me, questioned me adroitly on our plans, and when he learnt that we were all to lunch in the town he showed his lover's joy by inviting us all to the pastry-cook's where the fashionable crowd would be gathered.

The café which belonged to Irma's parents was the prettiest in the town, having a long terrace, and tables of cool marble behind little trees and green tubs gay with geraniums. We went in by the large swing doors and at the far end of the room, by the leather *canapé* against the wall, two tables were laid end to end. The girls were put on the leather *canapé* which stuck to my bare legs. Aunt Jeanne was at one end of the table on a chair, her husband at the other end, ready to jump up at a moment's notice and look after a customer or to put some money in the till. The waiter lunched with us, his napkin over his shoulder. We ate very happily but discreetly, being obliged every time a customer of importance passed to say good morning even though our mouths were full.

When lunch was over Ernestine went up to Irma's room. They looked very fine as they walked away, Irma being no less tall and good-looking. Before they had made many steps they turned and invited me to join them which I did with alacrity. Irma had a young man who was doing his military service on the Riviera and who sent her magnificently coloured picture postcards of mimosa and blue skies which she stuck in an album. The two young women, after admiring these cards, tried on each other's hats, measured their waists, spoke of the novels they had read, and at three o'clock returned to the café which by now was full of people; some, the young ones, their sleeves rolled up, playing billiards, the older ones drinking cool glasses of beer as they watched the activity under the trees.

At a table, all alone, his straw hat placed carefully on the unoccupied chair, a bottle of lemonade untouched, Louis Verdier was waiting. I went over to sit with him and he gave me a cardboard doll to cut out, and this gift enchanted me, for I was not particularly spoilt by the Agnel family, and I was touched by this



mark of kindness. We talked merrily, I entirely absorbed, he merely waiting for Ernestine, but she, knowing that he was pining for her, laughed with the billiard players till, more interested in their play than in her, they turned their backs on her, leaving her unattended. Gracefully, and not showing her vexation, she went over to Irma who was washing glasses behind the counter, lifting them against the light to judge of their specklessness, and then plunging others under the tap and arranging them upside-down and still dripping on the counter so that the water ran off from them in rivulets. She made me a sign as I watched her, inviting me to come over and dry them with a fine linen cloth, and leaving Ernestine's unfortunate lover all alone I ran to the counter.

When evening came it was no longer possible to put off our return home where my uncle and aunt would be waiting for us, having hurried to their beloved arbour immediately after lunch. This was the moment Louis had been so patiently waiting for, and his eyes were moist with grateful tears as Ernestine slipped her arm in his to wend her way back. In her spare hand she carried her monumental hat wrapped up in a square of white linen, for at this hour all the women in the streets would be bareheaded.

Up the mountain path I ran behind or in front of them picking camomile flowers, there being no other flowers at this season, the earth being pitilessly burnt by the sun. We passed over a bridge under which flowed a river of tar which one could gather up and mould into pretty shapes, such as cups and saucers for my dolls, but they were sad to look at because of their blackness. After this we came upon a street in which there were a few shops. Louis gave me a halfpenny to buy a bag of toffee. Then, when we were in sight of our house, I heard Ernestine forbidding Louis to come any further, saying that she would not have all the women round about knowing she had a young man. They talked a little longer. On Thursday evening there was to be a cinematograph performance under the trees in front of Irma's café. Louis Verdier wanted us both to go with him, and Ernestine promised that if her parents were agreeable she would bring me to this same spot after supper where he could meet us as if by accident.

During the next few days Ernestine did little but sigh, and when her mother asked her if she were ill she answered: 'No, I'm just bored!' Then a moment later she would exclaim: 'I wish I were in Irma's shoes, living in the middle of the town!

She at least has a good time!’ Poor Aunt Eugénie was terribly upset, and not knowing how to take her daughter’s mind off this painful subject would say coaxingly: ‘Come! A big girl like you must not cry!’

‘That’s the point!’ exclaimed Ernestine, flaring up. ‘I am a big girl, and look at the way you treat me. I never go out except on Sundays, and that’s only to go to church!’

On the Wednesday she refused to get up, saying there was nothing to get up for. Nobody called except the postman, and the young one had been replaced, whilst he did his military service, by an old fellow who puffed in your face and smelled of garlic and red wine. This time Aunt Eugénie was seriously alarmed. The baker’s man was at the gate, loudly blowing his hunting horn, for Aunt Eugénie came down herself on Wednesdays to pay the bill. We tore down the path together, she and I, and as soon as he saw us he gave me, with a little pout, a sheaf of handbills with all the details of the cinematograph performance, saying: ‘There you are, Milou’s little girl, you can make paper boats with these, for nobody in this part of the town wants to bother about such fantasies!’

The handbills smelled of fresh ink, and as we went back to the house my aunt held the bread in one hand and a printed notice in the other, reading aloud the headlines: ‘Great cinematograph performance to-morrow night, Thursday, in the open air.’ Suddenly she lifted her head and shouted excitedly in the direction of our bedroom window: ‘Ernestine! Ernestine! This is a real coincidence! As you’re so frightfully bored, how would you like to go to the cinematograph to-morrow night?’

Slowly Ernestine put her pretty head out of the window and answered, yawning: ‘You know quite well that papa would never let me go alone!’

Mme Agnel, willing to do anything to bring back a smile to her daughter’s face, said: ‘We will ask your father this evening while he is washing himself under the vine, and I’ll prepare the tomatoes for supper the way he likes them best so that he can’t help being in a good temper.’

Ernestine made no answer but decided that she would get up, and when her mother had made her bed and tidied her room we sat down to lunch: a salad, a piece of goat’s cheese, and a bowl of coffee. The long afternoon dragged on, implacably hot,

whilst Mme Agnel knitted, her ball of wool reposing in a long osier basket which had been Ernestine's cot, and in which many generations of the family were rocked when babies.

I loved the heat, the sound of my aunt's knitting-needles, and the monotonous singing of the cicadas. Putting my fingers through the treasures in the osier basket, I sought inspiration from the various coloured wools and pieces of material for the fine dresses I would wear when I was grown up and married. I thought I would also have a cherry-coloured blouse like the one H  l  ne wore at my uncle's place in the rue de Longchamps, so very becoming with a black skirt. I thought of something languid and frilly, in pale blue, to wear in the morning when I got up, with vaporous flounces and a train of aerial lightness. Ernestine chose apple greens, pinks, and yellowish golds, but her imagination, less capable of high flights, could not picture the dresses of her future wardrobe cut and sewn. Mine were clear to me to the last fold and hook. They rustled as I walked, and in numbers would have exceeded those of Sarah Bernhardt. The design of my hats I left to Rolande who was already acquiring her mother's cleverness in this direction. My occupation was so engrossing in the cool of the vine arbour that I even forgot the existence of my dolls, a serious omission, proving that I was unconsciously neglecting my maternal responsibilities to become a vain and flippant woman.

Ernestine began to yawn. Her new attack of boredom momentarily checked my contentment, but I was soon off again on another line of thought. I would open a store full of electric globes and soft materials, having a gilt lift and coloured balloons like the *Galleries Lafayette*, and it would be fun to see Ernestine's face when I showed it to her, for she had never seen anything of this sort in her small-town life. She shrugged her shoulders when I told her of my plan and said to her mother grumpily: 'This child never seems to languish as I do. She's for ever inventing things.'

When my Uncle Ernest arrived back from the mine we welcomed him with an even greater show of affection than normally. There was quite a scuffle to bring his slippers. Ernestine held up the towel while her mother ran off to see how her baked tomatoes were progressing in the oven. The smell was delicious. They must be cooked to perfection. The poor man was delighted

but a tiny bit anxious. He was suspicious. We could all see that. Ernestine was beautiful, but nobody had taught her how to be gracious, and when she tried to please there was something unnatural in her behaviour. At any rate, when my uncle was clean and had been kissed by us all in turn, he sniffed the tomatoes and smiled as he walked towards the supper table. There was the tenderest expression on his face. Nevertheless, my Aunt Eugénie was nervously fussing about and talking about a dozen different things, mixing them all up together. She was not exactly afraid of her husband but she knew that when he said 'No' it was impossible to make him change his mind. He was calm but obstinate. My Aunt Eugénie was rather ostentatiously preparing something on a tray to take up to poor Aunt Marie who had already been put to bed, when she began:

'Ernest, my love, did you pass by the main square on your way from the mine?'

He looked up at her inquiringly. 'Why, yes,' he answered. 'What makes you ask?'

The tray shook a little in her hands. She continued:

'You didn't see anything extraordinary?'

'Perhaps I didn't look very carefully. Has somebody opened a new shop?'

'Oh, no, not that.'

'Well,' he answered, 'I give it up. Everything appeared as usual.'

Ernestine's cheeks had become the colour of her mother's tomatoes. My Aunt Eugénie broke out, all in a breath, desperately:

'It's that our little Ernestine would like us to take her to the cinematograph show under the chestnut-trees to-morrow night!'

The words had flown out of her mouth. We all looked anxiously at Uncle Ernest. My aunt, a little bolder now that the elements had not come down from heaven to strike her dead, went on:

'Of course, we would come straight home and you would not be in bed too late.'

My uncle turned the matter over in his mind, and then pouring himself out a glass of wine, said slowly:

'I could never do it. I'm far too tired after a day in the mine. Take the girl yourself. I'll be happy enough by myself, for once.'

My aunt, who had not the slightest desire to go to the cinema,

exclaimed, looking at me: 'Why, when I come to think of it, my little *pitchbounette*, how would you like to go?'

I became, with this, the centre of their conversation. Everybody, mindful of the laws of hospitality, politely offered to take me, but Ernestine's voice at last dominated the others with these words: 'I really do think I am old enough to take a little girl to the cinema!'

Her mother, relieved at the thought that she would be able to stay at home with her husband, answered quickly:

'Of course you are!'

Uncle Ernest said protectively: 'Wouldn't you be afraid, Ernestine?' Then, noticing the resentment in her features: 'No, I suppose not. After all, you are eighteen.'

'Then can I go?'

'Yes, you can go.'

Ernestine gave a little yell of joy. She kissed her father, her mother, and me, and gave me, in recognition of my usefulness in this affair, a beautiful ribbon of striped taffeta which shone like the wings of a butterfly. The meal, in these circumstances, was a magnificent success, and afterwards, when they played dominoes, I marking the points, Ernestine, losing, forgot to be angry.

The next morning the postman brought two letters, one for me from my mother, and the other for Ernestine who, never having received a letter before, took it into the house to ask her mother from whom she thought it might be. The three of us gathered round to open it, pulling out from the envelope a large sheet of pale blue paper, bordered with doves, butterflies, and lilies and in the centre of which were some verses signed by Louis Verdier. Ernestine thought the border pretty but said the poem was silly. Her mother and I, on the other hand, were very touched by this expression of Louis Verdier's love.

The day passed quickly enough. Ernestine kept her curlers on till evening, applied young lettuce leaves to her cheeks to give them a suitable pallor, and tried on all her skirts.

We were ready immediately after supper, Ernestine in a white skirt and her lace blouse. A long muslin scarf rested gently on her dark hair, making her look like some magnificent oriental flower in a *sari*. Never had I seen her so simply dressed or so utterly beautiful, or her eyes so large with expectation and pleasure. 'You are beautiful!' I exclaimed, looking at her, and she blushed.

My aunt and uncle bade us good-bye, and my uncle specially showed his admiration for so lovely a daughter. Her dark eyes and fine-grained skin were his, her mother's qualities being exclusively in the gentleness of her character and her usefulness as a housewife. My aunt gave a little money to Ernestine and I was given sixpence.

A short way down the road Louis Verdier was waiting for us, a white silk handkerchief hanging out of the breast pocket of his blue yachting jacket with the silver buttons. Ernestine, the ends of her muslin scarf floating behind her, had an amazing effect upon him. He looked at her, subjugated, speechless. She teased him, saying:

'Well, what's the matter with you? Have you lost your tongue? I suppose I am not to your liking?'

He answered finally: 'Oh, yes, but I would have liked to find other words with which to say it.'

'Don't worry,' she answered callously, 'for if they were anything like those verses you sent me I wouldn't understand a thing!'

He silently took her by the arm, wincing under the failure of his sonnet, but in a few moments he pressed her more tightly to him, and walked with his head leaning against her breast like a wounded bird. Though not saying anything, he enjoyed to the full the possession of this moment. Falling night enveloped them both. Their silhouettes appeared, his dark, hers white. They were charming. Soon night fell altogether, but from the direction of the town came the sound of laughter and chairs being dragged. Louis Verdier sighed.

'I wish it were already time to go home,' he whispered. 'I could walk like this, next to you, for ever. Oh, how I love you!' He was quite broken with emotion and went on: 'What shall I become? What shall I become?'

Suddenly, at this late moment, he became aware of my presence, and, making me a little bow, exclaimed: 'My most profound respects, little Madeleine. I had forgotten all about you!'

He smiled sadly, affectionately. Ernestine, who was a good deal moved by his declaration, put in softly: 'We mustn't forget about her. She made our meeting possible.'

We arrived in the main square.

A white screen had been made taut by ropes stretched to the branches of the chestnut-trees, and in front of it all the benches

from the boys' school and the girls' school, on which a great many people were amorously or noisily seated, had been arranged, the girls and boys of schoolage huddled in front. The mayor, a former miner, talked importantly with the two doctors: the general practitioner who, though the sun had long since been replaced by a bright moon, wore a panama, and the doctor of the mine. Louis Verdier had taken us to the terrace of the café from where we could see all that was happening whilst enjoying a cooling drink. Suddenly the lights went out, and the performance began.

The film was a comic. A coal-heaver with a sack of coals on his back met a miller with a sack of flour, and the two men fell upon each other. It did one good to hear the peals of laughter, or at least, I think in retrospect, it would have done; but for me who, having followed Ernestine and Louis through the dark streets, had transformed them into a prince and princess touched by the fairy wand of love, the coarse jokes on the screen jarred my romantic sense. Louis did not laugh either, but in his case he had certainly no idea of what the picture was about, for he was looking only at Ernestine, and one had the impression he was breathing in her very soul. Clearly from hour to hour his love was surging up more powerful.

There was an interval.

A man and a woman came over to our table, and Louis, seeing them, blushed deeply. Rising, he went towards them, whispering in the woman's ear: 'Mother, it's her!' These words, hushed but near me, were the only ones he uttered. The 'her' sounded like a reference to some goddess of the mountain, and after it had left his lips he was too moved to do anything but limply make room for his parents at our table. I do not believe the father took in what was happening, but both sat down a moment and the mother scrutinized Ernestine closely. Then the performance began again and they went away. Louis replunged himself, with even greater content, into the contemplation of his loved one, whilst I, exhausted by the heat, the noise, and the effect made upon me by Ernestine's romance, fell fast asleep.

On the way back the lovers, very close to each other, would stop to kiss. They were continually bidding each other good-bye and then continuing their slow climb. I was sleepy, and felt suddenly horribly alone in the warm air under the bright stars. The road was quiet, and the housewives we had seen earlier

drinking their coffee on their doorsteps had been replaced by big cats enjoying the beauties of the night. One was surprised not to hear them talking with human voices, gossiping about their owners. Some got up at our approach and ran in front of us, the black ones reputedly of ill omen.

When we reached home my Aunt Eugénie, fatigue and anxiety lining her face, was waiting up for us. I hurried into bed and had just time before closing my eyes to see her undressing her daughter.

Plans were made for me to attend a day-school kept by the nuns. I was to leave early every morning and go to an old lady who took her granddaughter to the same school and would now take us both down. Under my arm, as in the pictures of Little Red Riding Hood, was to be a basket with my lunch, bread, goat's cheese, and some grapes. At four Ernestine would come to fetch me, and as a return courtesy see safely home the little girl whose grandmother had taken me to school in the morning.

I was a good deal worried about this important change in my life. I spoke of it to the rabbits and the hens. The big cat who liked to sleep on my pretty materials blinked as if he understood.

The school proved adorable—a sandy courtyard, tall trees with thick leaves, benches set out in their shade, and a table at which sat a sister of St. Vincent in blue, the lower part of her veil resting starchily on her shoulders, the upper part flapping like the wings of a great white bird. When the sun was at its hottest she would lift the tips of these wings with extreme delicacy till they touched above the crown of her head, and then secure them in this upright position with a clothes-peg. One saw her then in quite a different light. She was very old and tiny, her body withered, her cheeks brick red, her black eyes swift to notice and full of kindness. When she learnt that I was Milou's little girl she kissed me, saying that she had taught him to read. There were little boys in this school. We sang hymns and were never punished.

Twice a week we used to put flowers on the church altar. A nun went to the altar, prostrated herself, took a silver vase in both hands, prostrated herself again, and brought it to us. We would fill it with white roses or lilies. This rite was carried out for every vase. The flowers filled the church with their heavy scent, and once, overcome by it, I fainted.

On Saturday mornings we were brought a great quantity of



freshly cut roses from which we had to pull the petals for a religious procession. We sat on the floor round a white linen sheet, throwing the petals into baskets. The very open flowers shed their white dresses easily, but when my fingers closed on the buds I felt so sad, imagining them to be princesses in disguise, that I was overcome, and I would stuff them in the pockets of my dress. There they would remain forgotten till, a day or so later, I would find them more sadly withered, more surely touched by death, than if I had not been moved by a desire to save their lives.

Ernestine was delighted to have an excuse to come to town every afternoon. She would lunch at home with my Aunt Eugénie, take her siesta, and then walk down to Irma's café where she would stay till four. We would go back with her to Irma's, and after a while take the road home by the mountain; and every day, as if by accident, Louis would suddenly appear from behind a bush or a tree. Once, instead of going as usual to Irma's, we went to call on Mme Verdier. Louis's parents liked solid furniture. The dining-room was in French Henry II style, a massive black sideboard, and sculptured chairs done up in Cordova leather which stuck to my little bare legs disagreeably. The table was covered by a horrible rug on which minute tongues of black felt bordered with a buttonhole stitch in brightly coloured wool were superimposed like the scales of a fish. Young married women made these rugs on winter evenings, or even in the afternoons as they sat behind half-closed doors watching the people passing in the street. They were ugly but touched one's heart by the amount of work they represented. My Aunt Eugénie had a magnificent one, but it was carefully put away in naphtha balls for Ernestine when she married. Mme Verdier, excellent and severe, placed a chair against the table. I had the impression of being seated on a Spanish saddle with my legs wrapped up in a long cloak. She brought me the family album, bound in red velvet and fitted with a bright copper clasp, to look at while she talked to Ernestine. She spoke interminably of her son who, not strong enough to be called up for military service, but extremely clever, was on the point of becoming a mining engineer, a magnificent and enviable situation. The parents and grandparents were comfortably off and Louis would have a fine house the day he was married.

From time to time good Mme Verdier would look up and I

would plunge my blonde head over the faded photographs of little girls in their first communion dresses, married couples, young men in uniforms, mostly wearing the pretty beret of the *chasseurs* at an individual angle, babies on the knees of their grandmothers. I was too small to see the top of the book. Only the bottom row came within my line of vision. I have an idea I missed the most intriguing pictures. When I came to the last page I would turn back each leaf, and, after a time, Mme Verdier rose, opened the massive sideboard, and brought me some quince jelly which was excellent. Ernestine was very lucky to be loved by this woman's son who was the richest and cleverest young man in the Grand' Combe.

As a result of this visit, Louis came to lunch with us every Sunday under the vine. My Uncle Ernest had a great affection for him, but my aunt considered him too effeminate, too pale, his wrists too delicate, and his hands too white. She said she was afraid to touch him. They did not speak at all the same language. He only sipped the wine in his glass and never smoked. His one interest was to design motifs for the embroidery of Ernestine's trousseau. After he had made the drawing we would reproduce it with a carbon on the fine linen. Mme Verdier embroidered some of it, and the rest was done by an expert. The engagement was openly talked about and the young people, Louis especially, were radiant. Ernestine became prettier than ever, and there was not a young woman in the neighbourhood who was not jealous of her.

One day, when she had come to fetch me after school, passing through the centre of the little town, we kept close in to the shops where the sun was less intense. A small hairdresser's, newly opened, attracted our attention. In the window there was a wax model with a beautiful head of real hair, and round her, on black velvet, were undulating plaits of dark, brown, and blonde hair, tortoiseshell hairpins studded with imitation diamonds, and some bottles of fragrant perfume from the hot, beflowered city of Grasse. While we were enjoying the sight of all these wonderful things, a young man who, unnoticed by us, had been leaning against the door frame, exclaimed boldly to Ernestine: 'It would certainly be no good trying to sell *you* a plait of false hair!' He laughed, and Ernestine, looking up, blushed violently. We went off hurriedly, and, as Irma's café was at the end of the street,

Ernestine went in to question her friend about the young owner of this newly opened saloon.

Irma knew all about him. His name was Henri Toulouse. He had just finished his military training and, though not of the Grand Combe, was of a neighbouring town. He was apparently charming, had already made friends with the youth of the billiard saloon, and, being both generous and gay, had been put down by Irma's parents as an excellent customer.

The following Sunday Louis Verdier came to lunch again. While waiting for my Aunt Eugénie to lay the table the lovers, holding each other by the waist, walked backwards and forwards along the length of the terrace. When they came in front of the vine they stopped, turned round, kissed each other virtuously on the cheeks, and then resumed their promenade. They repeated this charming comedy quite twenty times. Ernestine had become a much more kindly person of late. Louis's love was so ardent that one felt its rays all about one like those of the sun. I watched them both, my heart filled with childish devotion. When at last, exhausted by the heat, they could walk no longer, they sat breathless at the table, laughing, delightfully happy. My Uncle Ernest looked benevolently at these young lovers so different from his own memories, the timid miner courting Eugénie, but he was proud to think his daughter was benefiting by his hard, sober years. My Aunt Eugénie arrived from indoors behind an enormous, round, earthenware dish, holding it by the single handle, sniffing proudly the steaming odour of jugged rabbit which, with a sauce of black olives and red wine, had been simmering on the charcoal since seven in the morning. The fat tabby passed ceaselessly between my aunt's legs, affectionate and hungry.

Louis was so quietly joyful that I loved him for being so much in love. He would have been delighted to spend the entire day with us in the family. He was already fond of my uncle and aunt, and he felt that Ernestine was by now really his, but Ernestine's nature demanded swiftly changing scenes and interests. She must see different people and be herself seen by them. In order to please her we were obliged immediately after lunch to go down to the main square, to spend a few moments looking at the townsmen playing bowls: middle-aged miners, shopkeepers, and dignitaries in their shirt-sleeves, their Sunday waistcoats unbuttoned, their straw hats placed at an angle or perched at the

back, revealing shining bald heads, sweating because of the torrid heat, repeating the same old jokes as, from time to time, they slapped a thigh with a fat, red hand, and gave a coarse, throaty laugh.

We went to drink coffee with Louis's parents. Mme Verdier, who had certainly hoped for this visit, had bought a magnificent cake, as light as a pair of lovers could wish, topped with freshly beaten cream. But Ernestine's mind was restless, thinking of the crowd which by now must have gathered at Aunt Jeanne's café. She was burning to see her cousin Irma.

The café, as she had supposed, was at its most colourful with not a table empty, but we, of course, having our private ways, walked superbly through the crowd to where Aunt Jeanne and her husband, at opposing ends of the family table, with Irma and the little waiter whose napkin was always under his arm, were avidly listening, in the company of many others I did not know, to an orator whose back was turned to us but who, obviously, was proving both witty and undividedly popular. Irma, seeing us, waved affectionately to Ernestine, and then rose to make room for us, all of which naturally disturbed the orator's discourse. He turned angrily, not liking the idea of anybody stealing his thunder, but as soon as he recognized Ernestine his features turned from threatening to gay, and he called out: 'Hallo, my proud young lady! Thus we meet again!' Afterwards, addressing me, he inquired if I were not even more stuck up than my big sister. The last query took on in his mouth a rather broad tone, for he was checked by a fear of having made too easy with us; but everybody found his joke excellent, everybody, I quickly own, but Louis and I whose happiness was shattered. We found each other's gaze and detected we were both near to tears.

Henri Toulouse was overcome by the presence of Ernestine, who was blushing as hotly as on the previous occasion in front of the shop. The two young people looked acutely at each other. Then Toulouse, making a circular gesture to embrace his audience, set about to recapture its attention and sympathy with coarse jokes and bombast. His stories had all to do with his military training, and one could not help being sorry for Louis who had been prevented by his health from proving himself equally a man. The hairdresser described encounters with his officers. One heard such phrases as: 'I told him this,' or 'I soon put him in his place,' or 'I paid for drinks all round.' The first

person singular was invariably predominant. This man was the ideal café orator, a splendid-looking creature with dark moustaches, bright amorous eyes, the sort of fellow to make himself loved by any girl and to get round older women with wheedling compliments.

Ernestine, swept out of her languor, looked at him with large melting eyes. She must have been burning inside. His voice thickened as he cast exploit after exploit, like bouquets, at her feet. His softest smiles and most knowing winks were for her. When Aunt Jeanne brought tall glasses of golden beer for her guests Louis pathetically declined. His feeble but only too marked answer brought stillness to the entire table. Henri Toulouse looked at him sharply and, warned of the truth by a lover's second sense, read into this refusal a personal affront. The two men glared at each other like antagonists armed with steel. Then somebody spoke, and for the moment this was all.

In the evening, when Ernestine and Louis walked slowly up the mountain road and Louis, as usual, slipped his arm round Ernestine's waist, she appeared restive, complained of a headache, said her feet hurt, that the flies were annoying, and that I either jumped too near her or lagged too far behind. It was no longer the return of the goddess touched by love, unheedful of the stones on the road.

We took leave of Louis at the last house, and without a word went up to bed. From the next day Ernestine took me to school and spent as many hours as she could at the café. Henri Toulouse was always popping out of his shop to refresh himself with a lemonade and amuse her with his coarse wit and his heavy compliments, and he would repeat, for all to hear, that now, unlike some shirkers he could name if he cared to, now that he, Henri Toulouse, had done his military service, his one, ever-present thought was to find a pretty girl and settle down to the happiness of married life; and at this point, if he had an audience, he would wave his arm in the direction of Ernestine and add: 'A girl like that. That's the sort of girl who would look a real picture in a nice, smart-looking shop!'

Ernestine was becoming more and more restless. She could not live away from the sight of Henri Toulouse. He occupied her every thought. He, meanwhile, was falling increasingly in love with the same theatrical excitement which took hold of him

when he was going forward with a barrack-room story. He was just as noisy a lover as an orator. Even his silences were ostentatious. When his drinking friends asked him suddenly: 'Eh, Toulouse, what's up?' he would look at them wild-eyed, put his hands to his heart, and exclaim:

'Honestly, I'm all changed. Something has happened inside me.'

Then somebody would pipe up:

'You're in love, Toulouse, that's what it is.'

'You think so?'

'Why, yes, Toulouse, it's obvious. You must marry.'

'Ah!' he would sigh. 'Getting married is easy. What's difficult is when the girl one loves isn't free.'

When this had gone on for some time all the regulars at the café knew that Henri's meridional heart was on fire, and as he was such a good fellow and quite a hand at billiards they sided with him against the sentimental Louis, and when the poor young man came into the café there would rise, from every table, tittering and whispered allusions to faint-hearted men who, instead of doing their military service, wore out their pants on office stools and earned more than they should because they had influential parents to speak up for them. Louis held his head with dignity. He was not intimidated by Henri Toulouse as a man, and as for the café whisperers, he took them for what they were, a fine set of cowards; but he knew he had lost Ernestine, at least for the moment, and was too gentle and sensitive to arm himself with loud words and flattery.

Ernestine was always writing to my mother for lace to make her trousseau, and after my mother had sent her what she was able to save from the blouses she still put together for Mme Gaillard, she was obliged, in view of the hospitality I was receiving from my Aunt Eugénie, to buy lace by the yard which soon became too onerous for her small means. When my mother came to the end of her savings she sent a final parcel of lace to Ernestine with a letter addressed to my aunt saying that as she could not afford such high terms Milou was coming to bring me home. The two women were appallingly vexed, neither having probably realized what a strain they were putting on my mother's purse. I heard some rather hard things said about my parents and I ceased going to school, but on the whole nobody treated me with any less kindness. Old Aunt Marie was told all about

it but she sided with us, perhaps because of the love she bore my father. After siesta my Aunt Eugénie took me down to see another cousin, Catherine Nègre, who was also much attached to my father and to whom I should have paid a visit earlier. The news that Milou was arriving was certainly the reason we went so suddenly to see her, and Catherine Nègre may even have written to my aunt, for as soon as we entered the low house where she lived all by herself she told us that my father had asked her to take charge of me till he came, being so angry with his sister about her requests for lace that he refused even to see the Agnells. Catherine Nègre had the reputation of being a saint, which was increased by her solitary life and the fact that her son was a priest. She made a big fuss of me, and said to Aunt Eugénie: 'This is what happens when one is too greedy. God gave you the opportunity of doing a kindly act in taking your brother's little girl who needed our sunshine, but you merely thought of it as a chance to get something out of the poor mother who has just lost her *pitboun*. If my dear son were here he would make you see the shame of it, though to be sure with a heart like his he forgives everybody. You must become kinder, my good Eugénie, otherwise your daughter will go wrong for want of a good example.'

My aunt tried to justify herself, but Cousin Catherine went on: 'And do you suppose, my dear Eugénie, that it's right for your daughter always to be with her cousin in a public café? A daughter's place is with her mother. And besides, I hear she has a nice young man. Why have they not come to see me?'

My aunt looked down on the tiled floor. Her admiration for Cousin Catherine prevented her from speaking.

'And now that I have scolded you enough,' Cousin Catherine went on, 'go back home with little Madeleine, and when Milou arrives I will climb up to your place to fetch her. She will be better on the mountain than down here in the stuffy town with me. Now that Milou is taking her back to Paris the poor little girl will need every breath of air.'

When we reached home my aunt was obliged to tell her husband that Milou was going straight to Cousin Catherine. My uncle, who never understood anything about petticoat machinations, was puzzled and hurt, but it was old Aunt Marie's grief that was pitiful to see, for the poor woman took it into her head that in

these circumstances she would never see her Milou again, and that night she cried herself to sleep.

Our placid existence began to lose some of its charm, but the next Saturday Cousin Catherine came to take me to her house, my father having arrived. I saw him framed in the doorway, waiting for us, and when he heard me speaking patois, he laughed so happily that I was vexed.

Aunt Marie, having heard that Milou was in the town, made my aunt a scene that showed the violence of her character. She would not die without seeing her Milou again. He must come to her or she would go to him. My father decided that it would constitute no loss of face to go to his sister's house on the condition it was to call on Aunt Marie and not on the Agnells. Accordingly, on Sunday morning we climbed the road leading up the mountain and, reaching my aunt's house, went straight to Aunt Marie who was sobbing. Eugénie and Ernestine, hiding in a corner, looked rather silly, but as soon as my father saw them his big heart melted and he kissed them with such immense joy that everything was forgiven. My Uncle Ernest was delighted at this unexpected happening. To celebrate the event it was decided to spend the afternoon all together with Aunt Jeanne and Irma at the café.

On the way down Ernestine gave her arm to my father, and when we arrived she introduced him first to Henri Toulouse, then to Louis Verdier. I must confess that the unhappy Louis looked very out of sorts, my father giving it as his opinion that he was rather a fragile young man. Henri Toulouse, on the other hand, had scarcely time to finish his first barrack-room story before my father discovered that they had been in the same regiment and that Henri Toulouse had done his service, like Émile, at Nice. They immediately became fast friends, and Toulouse was wise enough to make full use of his new ally, for officially Louis Verdier was still betrothed to Ernestine.

Ernestine, at every joke, laughed very loud, throwing her head back in a movement full of sensuality. She was a slave of this hairdresser's slightest remark. One felt almost sorry for her. She knew now that she had never been in love with Louis. What she had taken for love was merely the satisfaction of being courted by a youth of good family and being engaged before her Cousin Irma. But this was love, love at first sight, love so blinding that



she could not even see what an inferior match she was making. She laughed and laughed again, triumphantly, full-throatedly, after the manner of a courtesan, and suddenly I saw Louis turn white and leave his chair. He appeared anxious to make himself as inconspicuous as possible as he stole past the fresh marble tables to a door at the back which led to a courtyard and an iron staircase built against the wall. I followed him. He climbed a few steps and then sat down, and burying his face in his hands cried. He cried so hard, with all his heart, that his shoulders rose and fell with each convulsive sob. I climbed the staircase and sat beside him, crying also. I cried over the sad end of my beautiful love story. I cried angrily to see Ernestine such a slave to this vulgar hairdresser. I cried over myself who the next day would be leaving the hot sun, my garden, the mountain we were always so afraid to see on fire, the cat which had taught me patois, Uncle Ernest whom I would no longer see plunging his black face into the cool water and come out all clean, the basket full of coloured wools, and the vine. Oh, how I cried! Suddenly he raised his head from the palms of his hands and saw that I was with him. He put his arms round me and said: 'My little Madeleine, how I would have learnt to love you if . . .' The rest of his sentence was lost in hot tears. I heard my father calling me, and running down the iron staircase I broke into the lighted café, my cheeks wet and my eyes red. Everybody wanted to know where I had been. I was anxiously questioned and I told them I had been with Louis Verdier, but even as I spoke I saw that Henri Toulouse had slipped his arm round Ernestine's waist and it was clear that the irremediable had happened, that poor Louis was forgotten, and that Ernestine had not a single regret to throw, as an act of charity, in his direction. Cousin Catherine was right. My Aunt Eugénie had set a bad example. Her daughter was not kind.

The next morning I woke up at the station in Paris. As we hurried down the platform I was so afraid to be separated from my father that I seized his strong hand. Several months in the country had made me unaccustomed to all the noise. I was

horribly aware of my coat and dress being too small, and my hat, after a night spent in a third-class compartment, being crushed. My arrival in Paris was not exactly a glorious one. I felt a sudden desire to see my mother.

When we arrived home my mother had only just got up. She had been working very late at night during my father's absence. I was overjoyed to see her. She marvelled at my pink cheeks and my arms browned by the sun. But when, in reply to her questions, I spoke like Ernestine spoke, in a strong accent and half in patois, a look of horror spread over her pale features. The children in the courtyard, having seen us arrive, were calling me and I was longing to join them. My accent surprised them and soon became an object of derision. My mother, anxious to deliver me from their jibes, called me and together we went to market.

Our open-air market was at its busiest at this hour of the morning. The colour and rich variety of the stalls set out under gay canvas on the pavement were delightful. My mother was gradually shedding her mourning and now wore white or mauve. We discovered Mme Valentin sitting on a folding stool, her fingers busily engaged in lacemaking, her eyes scanning the passing crowd, picking out potential buyers or welcoming with a glint those who had purchased from her in the past. She knew a great number of people, enumerating them for her benefit, not by their names but by their blemishes or idiosyncrasies—the little brunette who limps, the tall woman with the false hair, the nice little thing who spits in your face without realizing it. We would bid her good morning; she would answer amicably, but to see her thus at market made of her, in my eyes, quite a different person.

I thought it must be a wonderful thing to have a stall in the open air. A little further along, for instance, my mother called on a woman known as the 'fat brunette' whose dress-lengths and pieces of silk and satin were put out in the bowl of a black umbrella. Most of her materials were just too long for the rag merchants, but not quite long enough to make anything useful. Nevertheless my mother, who appeared to plunge herself bodily into the cavernous umbrella, managed with dexterity to bring up each piece in turn, calculating with an experienced eye its length, its possibilities, and suitability for me, to make an apron or a dress. When, after due thought, the length, the width, and the colour combined to give her satisfaction, she would ask in a

small voice, timidly: 'How much is this little piece, madam?' Then the 'fat brunette' would proclaim the measurements which my mother already knew, proceed to an appreciation of its quality, whether it was wool or silk or cotton, and, continuing for several more seconds to expatiate upon its merits, so that mentally she could fix the price at a safe figure, she would end by exclaiming: 'Well, my good lady, let us say eight sous, and I assure you it's a gift!' This declaration would seldom satisfy my mother who, throwing down the piece, would answer: 'Oh, dear me, no. That is much too expensive, and as it's a trifle on the short side I may as well keep my money to buy just what I need!' The 'fat brunette' would then say: 'Have it your way, little lady. You can have it for six sous, but if you were clever you would take this piece also which would cost twenty sous in the Avenue de Clichy but which I'll give you for twelve! Shall we call it a bargain? Twelve sous and six sous make eighteen, and here are two sous change out of your franc. I shall look out for you next week.'

My mother would be delighted with the piece that had cost her six sous, but she would be much less sure about the other. Her thoughts would go round and round upon this painful matter whilst we hurried past the butcher's on whose stall were lamb cutlets in paper frills and delectable steaks. My mother would continue, unseeing, until at last she reached some fishwife from whom she would buy two herrings in a newspaper, the only food which could compensate by its cheapness for her folly in buying that extra piece of material for twelve sous.

All the way home I would smell those acrid herrings, but my imagination would be coloured by the prettily flowered muslin which, fashioned by my mother, would turn itself into something adorable for me, something light, of a cut quite her own. Not till after my marriage in London were we ever able to buy a piece of material of the right length, but I believe this merely increased my mother's genius, causing her to invent subtle masterpieces.

I now noticed that we had some new tenants in our house or, to be exact, on the ground floor of the house next to ours, under Mme Valentin's flat. There was a tall girl of fourteen with a

tail of yellow hair down her back, uncouth, dirty, and quite straight. This Germaine Séguin had just arrived with her parents from Brittany. The mother was in a factory where they made men's collars out of celluloid, work which was both dangerous and unhealthy, but tolerably well paid. The father was employed by the Magasin du Printemps as a carpet-beater, which employment quickly ruins the lungs. When this man came home in the evening he put the soup on the hob, and then slipped his tired feet in bright red or blue slippers made out of the carpets he beat or mended, and thus shod he gave the impression of sliding across the floor on immense coloured rafts. When the soup began to sing he would push a short chair across the uneven paving-stones of the little courtyard till it stuck conveniently between the stones. He would then get astride of it and take out of his pocket a newspaper so minutely and tightly folded that the creases formed little squares as on a chess-board. From another pocket he pulled out a pair of spectacles which he placed across his forehead like an aviator. He would then read his newspaper, the print so near his eyes that a fly would only just have had room to pass between the paper and his nose. In this position he absorbed politics, crimes, scandals, and financial intelligence, keeping only the serial for after his supper.

This good man was an excellent citizen till Saturday which was pay-day. He would then go with his wife to the cafés and grocers which had given them credit during the week, pay these debts, eat pork-pies, and drink red wine till, having no more money left, he would follow her back to the flat where he slept thickly. On Sunday evenings he got up for a game of cards. On Monday morning he returned to work. By Tuesday he was again in debt.

The mother found a job for Germaine in the celluloid collar factory. The girl's tail of hair was put up in a bun which sat importantly above her not indelicate neck. When, in the evening, father and daughter sat out in the yard, the father with his large feet and the daughter with her oversize bun of hair looked like freaks on a fairground. But I was not to see them often together. Germaine began to wear high heels, knot a velvet ribbon round her thin neck, and speck her hair with *diamanté*. The martyrdom of walking with high heels over the paving-stones was compensated for by the impression she made on the bad lads round

the fortifications. When we came out of the underground station and followed the boulevard where the wash-house stood we would see her. Then she would hide under a railway arch or in a gateway, deserting momentarily the apache and the fire-eyed girls with whom she now passed all her spare time. The apaches were frightened of her because she was still a minor. From time to time they made her show up at the factory, not only for their own safety but to keep her parents ignorant of her nocturnal occupation. She knew that neither my mother nor I would talk, but occasionally she would say to me: 'The girl or the boy who lets on to my people what I do won't be long to get a knife in the small of the back when he or she leaves the Métro at night.'

We ended, my mother and I, by being very frightened. Every evening we saw youths moving swiftly, silently, over the uneven ground in linen shoes, their long trousers tight over the hips, wide at the bottom, a red kerchief round their necks, a cap with squares or of black satinette, their long white fingers juggling with the blade of a knife. They had the art of flattening themselves against a wall, stickily, like slugs, darting out of a hiding-place to run swiftly after some man walking home alone, late, perhaps a trifle drunk. They were not killers yet, learning the business till they were of age to move into Paris, but as they were many, without being brave they were insolent. To look in their direction was enough to bring insults on one's head. They were vulgar but often witty. When the police cycled past two by two, as they did once or twice a night, one heard catcalls and barking all along the boulevard which was the apache way of sending forth a warning. Then those who had no time to disappear would seize a barrow and pretend to be going quietly home. As soon as the police were gone, the youths would regroup, emit streams of contemptuous saliva, and then whistle or sing the most tender love-songs.

Germaine came to us one day. Her parents, as usual, were at work. She was upset and ended by confiding in my mother that she was in the middle of a miscarriage. A woman we knew at the public wash-house was apparently the expert, and the apaches and the girls, worried because of Germaine's age, would have nothing more to do with Germaine till it was all over. Germaine, though vicious, was still at heart a poor little girl, and

she would bury her face in her hands and cry. One night she was taken by pains and the whole house was awakened by her pitiful, unending yells. Afraid of her dangerous companions, she would not say anything to her parents, and we, being as frightened as she was, were equally silent. My mother said to Mme Séguin: 'It must be appendicitis.' She was taken to hospital weak from loss of blood, and the police came to make some inquiries. Germaine was too ill to talk the next day, but a search was made for the woman of the wash-house.

We were now in the last days of July 1914.

My Aunt Marie-Thérèse had invited me to stay for a week at the rue de Longchamps. Rolande went to quite a good school in the wealthy parish of St. Pierre de Chaillot. While she was there I spent the day with my aunt, mostly out and about, delivering hats to her customers or buying ribbons and veils in the stores. In the evening we had lots of visitors. When, at the end of this short holiday, I returned home I found that nothing seemed to be going right. My father had struck a moment of unemployment in the building trade, and was very depressed. Suddenly my Uncle Louis also lost his job, his wealthy employers having given him notice before going off on a trip to Scotland.

Mme Gaillard, when we went to see her in the Boulevard Haussmann, complained that all her rich customers from South America had already gone back. One of them, a tremendously wealthy woman from the Argentine, took all that was finest from her most expensive box, saying: 'Good-bye, Mme Gaillard. How I pity you! It will be a long time before we see any more lace from Belgium and France!' Mme Gaillard put her gold coins away carefully. Business was bad, her son's health had become alarming, and she felt guilty about having brought him to Paris. He might have been better in their native Auvergne but she had felt the need of him so much!

The doorkeeper watched her with humid eyes from his chair. They had been secretly married, and this old man who had once taken a delight in persecuting her was now a tender husband.

I found it very hard to believe that our good Mme Gaillard, as we continued to call her, now shared without fear the doorkeeper's lodge which my imagination pictured hung with whips and instruments of torture. They invited us in, and I was surprised to see a large rectangular table drawn up against the curtained window, upon which there stood a veritable forest of rare plants in their pots. Each pot stood on a white saucer. Some of the pots were tied round with satin ribbon, pink or blue or tricolour. A little palm-tree grew out of a cask barded with shining copper. There were also many rare birds of pretty plumage in cages, rich cages with coloured bars. A large cat, content and well fed, blinked sleepily between the flowers and the birds. The air was scented and tuneful. On the chimney-piece, between two ferns, was a marriage wreath of orange blossom under a glass globe. A photograph tied with a ribbon of faded tulle showed the doorkeeper in the uniform of a cavalry regiment with shining cuirass and helmet streaked with horse-hair, standing proudly beside his first wife in her wedding gown. Other relics attracted my childish eyes—a military medal in a leather case, a piece of shrapnel, a woman's gold watch with amethysts at the end of a long chain. I think I was looking at these things mostly to bolster up my courage, for at that moment I was alone with the doorkeeper and I was still a good deal afraid of him. He came up softly behind me and took in his rugged hands the shrapnel and the medal.

'There, little girl,' he said, 'to win the medal I had to have the shrapnel in my thigh. Do you remember my first wife?'

'Yes, a little,' I answered.

'Well,' he continued, 'we made a fine couple, and we waltzed all the night of our marriage. As a matter of fact, I waltzed that night all the waltzes of a lifetime, for soon afterwards, during the war of 1870, I was taken prisoner at Sedan and it was trying to escape over a bridge that I got that piece of shrapnel in my thigh. So you see, that put an end to my waltzing days!'

He played with one or two other small objects on the mantelpiece and added:

'When I came back to my wife, dragging a wooden leg, and nothing to keep us but a small pension, things looked pretty bad till one spring morning, as I was sitting on a bench in the avenue of the Bois de Boulogne, warming my stump in the sun,

who should I see coming along but my officer? The excellent gentleman had escaped over the bridge at Sedan at the same time, as I had, and later it was he who got me the medal. He asked me how things were going, and when I told him it was not easy for a man with a wooden leg to live on a small pension he gave me the job of doorkeeper here. That was in 1873. My first wife died here, and I shall too, I hope. As for my officer, the brave gentleman lives on the second floor, and the palm-tree in the cask you were admiring just now is his. He brought it back from Tunis after a campaign. The poor gentleman is getting old, but as you see, I still serve him when he's in town.'

He turned awkwardly on his stump and went on:

'The tall fern with the red ribbon belongs to a lady who sang in opera. She is retired and spends six months of the year at Evian. That is when the plant comes down to me and this is the tenth summer I've been looking after it.'

He waved his arm possessively and said:

'You can be sure, little girl, that I know all there is to be known about these plants and they know me. The birds, too, they belong to the tenants, for the tenants in this house all have a place in the country. Retired people they are, whose children have families of their own, mostly in smarter parts of Paris, for the younger folk want lifts and big windows that let in the air.'

He laughed gruffly to show that he was not the sort of man to be taken in by the youngsters, and went on:

'Would you think, by looking at those plants, that the air about here was no good? That tall young lady, the fern over in the corner, has grown a whole new storey this spring. See how the leaves are of a tender green! And the cactus and the hydrangea and my officer's palm-tree. I would say they were nearly all as old as you. By the way, how old are you, little girl?'

'I shall be eight next month,' I answered.

'That's as I thought,' he said, 'and if you ask me my opinion, I look after my plants a deal better than your parents look after you. I give them good clear water to drink. I protect them from slugs and flies. I put them, each in turn, in the sun, and when the barometer is set fine I put them outside on a bench I made specially so that the dogs cannot sully them. Tell me, little girl, do you like my plants?'



'Oh, yes,' I answered, 'but I like the ribbons best.'

'Is that so? I'm glad, for it is I who dress them. Come and peep into this drawer.'

Raising myself on my toes I saw to my delight yards upon yards of different coloured ribbons. Some were red, white, and blue. Others were of the tenderest blues and pinks. He gave me some pieces which had already been used. They struck me as sumptuous. I thanked him, my joy overflowing, and I said:

'Does Mme Gaillard like your plants?'

'Very much, but the trouble is,' he exclaimed, laughing, 'that she would like to put lace flounces under their ribbons!'

This idea quite went to my heart, and I said:

'Oh, but it would be much prettier!'

What surprised me most was my former enemy's double life. I had imagined him for so long an ogre that to see him laughing, playing with his ribbons, was too absurd. I thought his plants pretty, but I liked them less than the lilac in our garden and the wild flowers at Marais.

On the last Sunday in July we went for lunch to the rue de Longchamps where Rose arrived in tears. Her good-looking lover had suddenly disappeared. The German nurse who looked after the children in the house where she was cook had also gone without even waiting to collect her wages for July. My Uncle Louis's Austrian friends had all left. Some did not trouble to take any luggage, saying that they were merely going for a walk. Nobody knew what to make of it. Rose was in a piteous state. How could he have been so cruel? She muttered his undoubted qualities like prayers between sobs—so honest, so distinguished, so immensely clever, of such an excellent family! Alas, we learnt far too quickly the reason for all these happenings. Rolande and I watched the bill-stickers pasting up the orders for mobilization on the walls of Paris, black writing on white sheets with two flags in colour at the top. We would run from one placard to the other hoping to discover they were not exactly alike. Crowds gathered in front of them. Then we would slip in front of the grown-ups to read all over again the same fateful word. Mobilization! Mobilization!

# 9

**A**S my Uncle Louis was ten years younger than my father, he was the first to receive his call-up papers. That morning I saw Marie-Thérèse huddled on a doll's chair in a corner of the room where Rolande kept her toys. Her face was covered by her hands and she was crying. My uncle was pacing up and down behind her, but soon he put his large hands on her quaking frail shoulders and said:

'Come, little wife, there's nothing definite yet. There's still time for something to happen. There may not be a war after all.'

Rolande and I were also sad, though our sadness was a pose more than a state of mind. We were already tired of pretending to be sad when suddenly from the far end of the rue de Longchamps a trumpet call broke across the warm air. Rolande and I darted to the window, but as we could see nothing we climbed on the sill. Two strong hands gripped us and drew us into the room again. We were then, rightly, smacked. I think that if my uncle had not been there we would have both fallen from this sixth-floor window into the street. My aunt was much too busy crying on her doll's chair to have taken any notice of us.

My father and my mother had gone to the savings bank to draw out their savings. Long queues had formed outside all the banks, and my father had taken his stand at four in the morning. My mother went as often as she could to relieve him or take him something to eat.

That evening we walked all across Paris from the rue de Longchamps to our flat in Clichy. A few people were gathered round the Arc de Triomphe. People fought each other. Insults were thrown. Other people embraced each other or wept. No quarter was given to any unfortunate Alsatian whose guttural accent suggested he might be a German. People jumped to the conclusion he was a spy. He would be hit, and the police would have to rescue him from a quickly forming, nervous

crowd. Our apaches crossed the fortifications, descended upon Paris, and taking advantage of these disorders forced their way into shops, making the onlookers believe they were doing so out of patriotism because the owners were German. The dairy next to our house had a German name. Broken eggs made splashes on the pretty, clean walls. Milk which I would have been glad to drink was spilt uselessly on the floor. The factory where Mme Séguin made celluloid collars was smashed because the Dutch owner was thought to have German sympathies. Across the street flames were going up from a gramophone factory, threatening nearby houses. The main gates in the fortifications were closed as in medieval days, only the side-doors, guarded by two gendarmes, being open. The fine houses in the leafy avenues had their shutters up. The underground had ceased to work, but a few buses went by and there were taxis with luggage on the roofs hurrying from one station to the other. Everybody who could left Paris. Mme Valentin, quite terrified, had gone with her daughter Augustine and the children into the mountains of the Auvergne. Augustine, for this journey, had apparently put on a corset and shoes for the first time in seven years. The Séguins hurried away. Two days later my father left to join his regiment on the Italian frontier. He was neither proud nor brave. England had just declared war. My father cried. I cried. My mother cried.

As soon as my father had gone we went to live with Marie Thérèse, thinking it would be cheaper to combine the feminine members of the two homes. Marie-Thérèse was genuinely grieved to lose her husband. My mother merely considered this phase as a possible holiday. She had worked hard all the summer, and in addition to her blouses had made two suits for my father and turned his overcoat, and it was annoying to think she had done it all for nothing. There was no longer any question of making blouses. Mme Gaillard had taken her dying son to the Auvergne, leaving her new husband in his porter's lodge with his beribboned plants and singing birds. Marie-Thérèse was also without work. Her customers had all gone to the country and were not yet back.

My aunt and her daughter were accustomed, when alone, to dispense with the complicated business of cooking. For instance, they would merely eat a piece of bread and a few grapes or nibble

a bar of chocolate. If the urge to cook ever did overcome Marie-Thérèse it would be to spend the whole morning making something horribly difficult but quite flippant, like meringues and whipped cream. Of course, this would be served as the only dish so that afterwards we would be as hungry as ever.

During the first days of our association Marie-Thérèse would say to her sister: 'You must admit, Matilda, that we can quite well do without your heavy meals. To-day, for instance, we have only spent eight sous.'

My mother would answer: 'Do you suppose that in winter we shall eat peaches and grapes?'

'Of course,' Marie-Thérèse would insist. 'You'll see. It's such fun. We shall be able to look at the shops instead.'

After a fortnight the colour had gone from my cheeks and I did nothing but sleep. My mother quickly saw the danger, and insisted that Marie-Thérèse should provide us with something more substantial, but my aunt accused her sister of having the vulgar gluttony of a workman's wife. She said the mere thought of steak and fried potatoes made her swoon. It was time we shook the atmosphere of apaches and rag-and-bone men out of our system, she contended. My mother sulked. Marie-Thérèse also sulked and took her daughter out for a walk. My mother took a piece of paper, wrote half a dozen lines on it, placed it on the long, crisp bread, and having packed our belongings in two of her sister's hat-boxes, took me by the hand and slammed the door behind us.

It was a long way home. From time to time we sat down on a bench under the trees. The weather was magnificent, but Paris was so empty that we hardly met anybody. The flags of the Allies flew from the windows. There were thousands upon thousands of them. One saw them waving through the leafy greenness of the chestnut-trees, and some of them were strange and until recently unknown to us, like the flags of Montenegro and Serbia. One seemed to hear the strains of the *Merry Widow* distantly rising, echoes of Balkan princes in musical comedies. The flag that impressed us more than any was that of the Czar Nicholas with the eagle. The Russian steam-roller was said to be crushing the German troops already. As we left the fine avenues of the centre there were fewer flags and they were smaller, but, already tired of the rue de Longchamps and what

in the eyes of Marie-Thérèse were the smart folk, I thirsted for a sight of the marshy land beyond the fortifications and the sound of our own people. My mother had reasons of her own for being pleased. She was free. Freedom, in her mind, was the right to eat what she pleased at the hour which suited her best, to read in bed until midnight or longer, not to get up early in the morning, to dirty so little linen that she could deal with it at home without going to the wash-house, not to be obliged to buy wine, but with the money she saved buy face powder and various other feminities for herself and for me.

When we came within sight of our house many familiar flats had their shutters closed—those of the Valentins, the Séguins, of Mme Choblais and her children—but as we reached the entrance we saw a perambulator, and looking into it we discovered that the pillow still had the warmth of a little head. The pram belonged to Lucienne Rosier.

Our apartment smelt horribly of damp. My mother threw back the shutters, filling the uninhabited room with light and air. She took me to the pump to draw water. I followed her everywhere. We would look at one another and break out laughing. We were so happy to be home again.

After we had done the housework and put away the things we had brought back in my aunt's handboxes, my mother took down her string bag and we went to market, walking light-heartedly and swiftly over the hot paving-stones. To celebrate our return my mother fried some potatoes. It was quite a feast.

Now that my father was in the army we no longer had any rent to pay. Our allocation was small, but as there was no wine, no alcohol, and no tobacco to upset our budget we could at last look after ourselves. Accordingly my mother invested in fifty yards of white calico with which to set us both up, and from that moment our living-room was strewn with flounced petticoats and night-dresses which were to be garnished with lace. Any pieces of lace left over from Mme Gaillard's blouses did us excellently. As the weather remained hot we used to leave our door wide open, and Mme Rosier would come with Lucienne to watch us admiringly.

I do not remember ever having learnt to sew, but I think it must have been then that I started seriously to make my own things, leaving my doll's wardrobe to my play hours. It was

much more difficult to make flounced petticoats and night-dresses for myself than for my doll. If the stitches showed my mother made me start all over again. I was trained in a hard school. She would not tolerate the erring needle, the slovenly seam, or a thimbleless middle finger. There is no better way to learn than under the sharp, unforgiving eyes of the maternal seamstress. My first petticoat, with the flounces edged with purl which Mme Valentin had given me, was really very pretty. My mother worked at a tremendous speed. When I went into raptures at the sight of her nimbleness she would answer: 'You see, I have the satisfaction of knowing in advance that my young customer will be pleased!'

Mme Rosier felt a great longing for all this beautiful lingerie, and one day she told my mother that if we would agree to make some garments for her and for her daughter, Lucienne, she would bring some material and do what she could to help. She made the admission she could not sew, and added that it made her even more ashamed than if she had not known how to read.

The next morning she came down with little Lucienne in one arm and an enormous bundle of bits and pieces under the other. She had bought a big stock of linen and silk and cotton from the rag-and-bone dealers for next to nothing during the first days of the war, and it took us nearly a week to sort them out for petticoats, aprons, blouses, and the like. Our far-sighted neighbour, not knowing how to sew, had lived practically in rags, unable to make use of these treasures.

Marguerite Rosier was at home all day. Her husband went out early and came back late. Hyacinthe's father and mother were peasants who owned a little farm on the plateau of Langres, modest farmers who worked desperately hard and who had ill spared Hyacinthe when he had been forced to leave them to seek a livelihood in Paris. The younger of two sons, he was born with an inflammation of the spine and one leg shorter than the other. This deformity was so pronounced that every time he made a step he gave the appearance of stooping to pick something off the ground. As a lad he was taught to milk and look after the cows, but being unable, because of the way he was made, to take a sudden step backwards, a cow one summer night flicked its tail into his right eye and blinded it. He was therefore, with only one eye and one valid leg, less fitted than ever to work on a

farm. The village priest, moved by the boy's miserable condition, advised the parents to have him educated in Langres where his physical deformity and his close-to-the-earth accent made him a grim joke. Of no natural intelligence, slow to learn and to memorize, Hyacinthe needed immense courage to pass what examinations were needed to serve as a junior clerk in a bank; but his perseverance was such that gradually he rose and was sent to headquarters in Paris. He had been there only a few months, lodging outside the city walls to save each penny, when he had first seen Marguerite at the window opposite, and had ended by courting her with romantic tunes on his violin.

The bank in Paris had been no easier than the bank in Langres or his school, for though his colleagues were less brutal, a trifle less coarse, they were cunning and underhand. He would find the door of his office locked just as he was due to see a customer; when a director crossed the floor the door would open mysteriously to humiliate him. He would find his pens stuck to his desk with glue, his drawers would conceal rotten eggs. When his colleagues heard that he was to marry a widow who was not only young but a virgin they sent him anonymous letters offering to replace him on the wedding night. He was neither bitter nor revengeful, for his life was now so governed by a greed for money that he was eternally plunged in deep calculations, working out hypothetical savings at compound interest, so that even when his shoes were quite worn out he would defer indefinitely the purchase of another pair.

His superiors were quick to see his value. He did not know what it was to be tired and had no desire whatever for anybody's money but his own. The bank was his spiritual mother. His proudest moments were crossing the threshold in the morning, entering the marble hall, cool in summer, overheated in the winter. His colleagues, most of whom were young, complained that the day was too long. They formed groups to talk about theatres, dances and *midinettes*, songs, and love. Their work was neither good nor bad. Hyacinthe's work was immutably excellent. He was never ill, never late. He would have preferred not to take any holidays.

The declaration of war was Hyacinthe's magnificent opportunity. All his colleagues, those fine dancers, those inveterate theatre-goers, those good-looking lovers, those alert walkers and

sportsmen, were carried off on the tide of war. Those who remained were very old. Hyacinthe became a manager. His salary was doubled. They needed him so badly that he slept for a week at the bank.

For Marguerite, for Lucienne, for my mother, and for me that week was a real joy. We did everything forbidden by husbands. We drank coffee with cream in it and ate caramels and cake. We made omelets with so much rum that the flames nearly set our hair on fire. We were deliciously frightened. My mother and Marguerite laughed like schoolgirls. We lived according to the impulse of the moment, as *demi-mondaines*, are supposed to live, taking a long walk one day, the next day not going out at all. We broke into our landlady's kitchen garden one night, but we could just as well have gone there by day, for she was away in the country. One afternoon, when Mme Maillard, Marguerite's mother, called on us she found all of us disguised, Marguerite wearing Hyacinthe's top-hat, my mother with a toque decorated with a feather broom, and I with one of my mother's hats. We were seated round the kitchen table, drinking coffee and eating an enormous omelet. Mme Maillard, knowing that her daughter was subject to fits, imagined she must have communicated to us a share of her madness. We laughed so much that little Lucienne began to cry.

Mme Maillard had come to tell us that her baker had sold his shop and that she was going to marry him. They were going to live on a bit of land he owned at Nogent. She wanted to know if her daughter would come to the wedding. Mme Maillard was then sixty, wrinkled as a winter apple. Marguerite thought the idea of her mother being married was so funny that she ripped the cloth from the table and draped it round the old lady's head to see how she looked as a bride. Mme Maillard herself was so gay that it struck us as just possible that she was already married and that they were in the midst of celebrating at the bakery, but we soon dismissed this thought and decided we would rehearse for a picturesque country wedding. Marguerite struck up a very old favourite for such occasions about a farmer who 'loved dearly his wife Jeanne, but would prefer to see her die than lose his precious cattle.' Marguerite carried off this song very well, with her hand on her heart. My mother gave us a sermon with the accent of the Berry, which she had not forgotten from her



childhood. Mme Maillard, a little nervous at the idea of being taken a second time to the altar, gave us a fresh account of how she had thrown the pepper into the eyes of her first husband's mistress.

The proceedings were likely to continue for some time, there being no husbands present (though, in truth, all the conversation turned on them) so I quietly slipped out into the courtyard to play ball. Suddenly, looking over the low wall which divided me from the street, I saw a familiar head, rising, falling, like a ship dropping from the crest of one wave to be taken up again on the next. I rushed with such eagerness to announce the news that I slipped on a mat outside our door and, landing on my posterior, shot across the room on my improvised toboggan. The three women at the imagined wedding feast laughed so hilariously that my words of warning were drowned. Though my pride was hurt I nevertheless continued to shout: 'M. Hyacinthe has arrived!' Suddenly I saw Marguerite throw off her hat, pick up her daughter, and rush upstairs with such speed that my mother, Mme Maillard, and even I remained wide-eyed.

A moment later Hyacinthe's uneven step tapped over the floor boards. We heard his wooden leg on the stairs. We listened to him pause and put the key into the lock. He was above us now. He stumped about a moment, took off a boot that fell noisily. We guessed he was changing his striped trousers, the ones he kept for the bank, and putting on others too frayed for public view. He would button up his alpaca waistcoat, light the spirit lamp and soon go down to the cellar to weigh the provisions he would give his wife for the next day or two.

All the tenants had private cellars in which they kept their wine and potatoes. Hyacinthe, since his recent advancement at the bank, had not had a chance to give his usual care to this matter with the result that Marguerite had gone without or borrowed from us. Every month Hyacinthe's parents sent him from their farm a tightly sewn sack and a barrel of wine. The railway people would have to leave these things in the passage because Hyacinthe would not trust the cellar key to his wife. As soon as he came home Hyacinthe, limping, sweating, cursing, wiping the sweat off his forehead with a pocket handkerchief, would force himself by an indomitable will to pull the sack and roll the barrel along the corridor, send them bumping down the stairs and into the damp

darkness of the cellar where he would light a candle stub and measure, with a mercer's wooden yard, how much wine the new barrel contained and what there was left in the old one. He was always afraid some tenant might bid him good evening whilst he was occupied in this way. In the passage or on the stairs, for instance, he never accepted an offer of help in bringing down his merchandise for fear it would cost him a glass of the wine. One felt it might have saved a lot of trouble not to drink any himself, but the miser had been brought up to it at meals. Besides, it was his due. He paid his parents' income tax which in those days was not considerable. His mother sent him hams and salted bacon, sausages, lard, butter, and quite a pyramid of potatoes. Everything had to be measured up and weighed, but as he was awkward, having only one leg and one eye, he was always having accidents. The wine would escape from the barrel. The candle, without protection, amidst so much grease and oil, would nearly set fire to the house, or else it would blow out and leave him sitting on a heap of coal in the dark.

We used to hear all about his adventures from Marguerite. He once turned the key in the padlock without having fastened the bolt. Anybody could have entered his precious cellar. He was three days before going back. Marguerite told us that when he returned to the flat after discovering this tragedy he was so white that she thought he must have seen a ghost behind one of the wine barrels. He told her in a shaking voice what had happened. 'Oh! If only I had known!' she exclaimed. On another occasion he came back smelling appallingly of rum, having broken a five-litre glass jar. Furious to see her care so little, he started a long speech about the savings they would have to make in consequence, and as he became more and more excited he raged round the room gesticulating. Marguerite, revengefully unsympathetic, laughed till she cried. Every first of April he would consign the oil lamp to a high cupboard, and from that day till winter his family would have to go to bed with the last light of evening. It was their custom to go to bed early. Hyacinthe rose at dawn and walked all the way to his bank in Paris to save the fare. Marguerite got up early too. What was wonderful about her was her capacity for fun. One evening, in a mood of devilry, she stole her husband's famous violin, the one on which he had played those love tunes to charm her, and

she arrived in our flat with the black case under her arm. We all went out into the passage and with the help of Mme Séguin, who had come back with her family to Paris, tried to pass the bow across the strings. Our laughter must have echoed through the house, especially when Marguerite, having put the fiddle in the right position under her chin, began to imitate her husband, limping about as he always did on these occasions. An upper window was thrown up and we heard Hyacinthe asking in an anxious tone what was happening. Of course he could not see us or we him, but he exclaimed: 'There's something funny going on. Oh, all those plaguy females!'

He closed the window and we heard him go back to bed. After giving him a minute or two to sleep we started up again with more gusto still. The window was flung open a second time and on this occasion Hyacinthe had discovered that his wife was missing from her accustomed place in the double bed. We heard him roar: 'That's enough, Marguerite. I can see you.' Of course, that was nonsense. He could not possibly have seen any of us. Mme Séguin called out: 'That's a lie, M. Hyacinthe. She's much too far from your one eye!'

Hyacinthe closed the window and our jesting ceased.

Germaine was now in a nursing home, a rather sinister place where they tried to reform girls. So many serious complications had followed her miscarriage that she had lost the use of her legs. The police had not discovered the woman who had done it for her. The war had broken in on their investigations. Mme Séguin was more concerned about herself than about her daughter whom she considered as a nuisance, a vague possible cause of trouble, she and her husband preparing to do factory work and not wanting the police about their tracks.

Mme Séguin sang well with a deep, throaty voice which the common people have. No woman could sing with more passionate warmth a song which then was sweeping Paris: *Sous les ponts de Paris*.

We had really no idea how the war was getting on. There had been a card, a highly coloured affair with mimosa and tangerines on it, that my father had sent us addressed to the rue de Longchamps and which Marie-Thérèse had forwarded. He was at Sospel, a fort on the Italian frontier, and I don't think he liked it at all, the manœuvres being extremely hard and the food indifferent. He said he was looking forward to leave.

One evening, after a particularly hot day, Mme Séguin, Marguerite, my mother, and I were all sitting on our cane-chairs in the courtyard when we heard the sound of horses along the road. Marguerite began to shudder. Horses' hoofs! We looked at her anxiously, wondering whether she would have an attack. The horses came nearer. Then we heard the big gates of the board schools being opened. Such a great commotion followed, hoofs on the gravel, people running, that we all four got up together and tore out into the street. What a sight! The school playing-ground was full of soldiers in bright red trousers. They were unshaven. Their dark blue cloaks were filthy. They looked as if they had neither slept nor eaten for a week. An army of beggars would not have made a more pitiful sight. Some limped in front of their horses. Others dropped the bridles and lay down on the gravel refusing to move. Two gendarmes stood at the gates and told us to go away. Obviously they had orders not to talk. We skirted the outside of the boys' school and after a while from an upper window we saw a curl of tobacco smoke, then a pipe. We crossed to the opposite pavement, looking up, and saw a soldier. He told us that the regiment had been in full retreat since 6th August, that Belgium had been invaded, and that the Germans were quite near Paris. We stayed looking up at him, our mouths open, our eyes glassy. We could not understand it. We had taken it so much for granted that the war was going on in a proper way, distantly. The soldier with the pipe was getting used to the idea of things going badly. His main interest was to have a loaf of bread. He asked us to go and get him one. Of course we promised. Marguerite, who was more moved than any of us, went to her flat and crept into the kitchen on tiptoe so that her husband would not hear her. She came down again with some provisions and four litres of wine which was what Hyacinthe had given her for the whole week. She whispered: 'I'm lucky. He was asleep.' We went to our place and put everything in a basket. It was so heavy that we could hardly lift it. The man with the pipe was waiting for us. My mother and Marguerite hoisted me on Mme Séguin's shoulders, and whilst I was thus not very securely balanced I started to hand up each thing, first the bread, then the bottles of wine. We all slept badly that night. Only Hyacinthe slept well.

These soldiers remained in the school for over a week, cut off

from the civilian population. This was perhaps a good thing for us, for they were covered with lice and mange. Apart from this we soon got tired of looking up at them, and we were not rich enough to feed them and take them wine. Hyacinthe had made us a little speech saying that as he was not personally responsible for the war, those who had started it might as well get on with it, that it was definitely no business of his. Of course, it was a nuisance about the Germans being so near Paris. The bank might have to close or be evacuated.

Queues began to form outside the grocers' shops. There were women who hoarded sugar and flour. As soon as the soldiers had gone, we saw the first refugees from Belgium and the north-east provinces. Marguerite was suddenly confronted by her aunt from Rheims.

We had often heard about this aunt from Rheims whom Marguerite, in her conversation, trotted out as being a cut above the others. There are many families who like to refer with pride to a member who has done better than the rest, just as in times past an Englishwoman might refer with pride to some distant cousin who had married the nephew of an earl. The aunt from Rheims lived in a house that belonged to her. Marguerite had met her at her sister Lucy's marriage, for I am not sure if I have mentioned that Marguerite's sister Lucy used a little money she inherited to get herself married to a professional soldier. This professional officer was a nephew of the aunt from Rheims. If these relationships are at all clear you will readily understand that though Marguerite and the aunt were poles apart our friend found it pleasant occasionally to bandy about a rich relation who, in our ears, had a fortune as inaccessible as that of the Rockefellers. My mother and I had always been very impressed. Whenever we had a new hat or a roast for lunch, it was a suitable occasion to exclaim: 'Why, it's good enough for Marguerite's aunt from Rheims!'

With all this in mind we saw a little old woman in black with a lot of ungainly packages done up with rope. She was covered with dust and her eyes were haggard with fear and fatigue, for her house had been transpierced by a shell. You can imagine what we felt like to see this legendary figure in such a terrible state. Could it really be that the aunt from Rheims was so insignificant, so dusty, and nervous. That she was now as poor as we were.

Even poorer. Her house was gone. She had nothing left but what she carried with her.

Seated very stiffly on a high-backed chair, her little hands joined pathetically on her black skirt, she remained silently in a dark corner, as, I suppose, she was used to sitting by her window overlooking some narrow and busy street in Rheims. When I saw her thus I thought she was dreaming of what she had lost. We made her a cup of coffee. She drank it eagerly and the bitter, familiar taste must have touched a chord, for she suddenly burst into tears. I fancy she did not see us through those tears which were shed for herself only. We stood in front of her like figures turned by fear into marble. We could not hope to understand what was taking place in her mind.

As Marguerite was unable to lodge her aunt we decided to give her hospitality for a night and the next day to take her to her niece Lucie who lived at St. Cloud. The old lady, accordingly, did not unpack any of her parcels. She took her shoes off, undid the ribbons of her black straw bonnet, and proceeded to remove from her hair dozens of tiny steel pins. Two plaits fell down her back like long, thin serpents. Now she unplaited them and one could see that they were speckled with white. She plaited them again and fastened them with all the little steel pins which she had just taken out, but she did not put her bonnet back. She washed her hands, took from a pocket of her petticoat a black rosary, and started to pray silently. One merely saw the lips moving rhythmically. This silent, pious presence in our room made us feel more uncomfortable than if she had talked all night. Instinctively we moved about the flat on tiptoe. My mother did not dare interrupt her prayers. As it was very late I was falling asleep in spite of the many black coffees which my mother, put out by the strange visitor, had made us drink.

I slept in my mother's bed. My own, with clean sheets, was left to the aunt; we found her stretched out on it the next morning, her hands joined under her breasts in the attitude of a corpse. Her eyes opened, however, and followed our every movement. Then she spoke. Hyacinthe could be heard coming down the stairs cloppety-clop, through the front door, and off to the bank. Marguerite arrived, all ready to go out, her hat on, and when she had gathered the aunt's parcels together they set off for St. Cloud, leaving us Lucienne. We watched them going, and when

they were quite a distance off, their heads bobbing up and down, we took Lucienne in our arms and danced for joy. The unfortunate lady in black had quite taken the spirits out of us.

Everywhere we went now the accent of the north filled the streets. Our most dreadful lodgings were snapped up by these refugees. The Belgians sorted old rags in the courtyards. There were Serbians also. The battle of the Marne was going on.

Lucienne was now old enough to play with me, though in games like those we organized on the burning asphalt of the street I would let her win. Then she would clap her hands delightedly. Suddenly we would hear the parish bells. The bells were rung to announce something out of the ordinary, but even if it was only a baptism we were glad of the fun. At the sound of the bells, therefore, Lucienne and I, hand in hand, would run down to the bottom of the street which, on one side, was bordered by a high wall surmounted by broken bottles. Above the wall and the glass one could see the higher branches of magnificent chestnut-trees and, farther, the buildings of the Gouin Hospital, a private institution where the nurses were nuns. We would watch their pretty caps with the triangular white sails floating in the breeze.

On arrival here we became aware of a funeral coming in our direction, but of an obviously special kind. The coffin was covered with flags and at one end a military cap and dark blue cape. Immediately behind the hearse wounded soldiers, helped by nurses, limped along. Some had their arms in slings; others had bandages across their heads. They looked like the coloured pictures of the war of 1870, for they still had gilt buttons on their capes and vivid red trousers. Their caps also were of the old kind. The procession, with wheels creaking on the paving-stones, went very slowly. When it reached the church the soldiers formed two rows and remained at the salute whilst the sisters, praying in low voices, their white wings floating, took down the coffin. There were so many wreaths that many were left on the pavement after the people had gone into the church. We read 'Mort pour la France' in golden letters. From others we gathered that the soldier who had thus bravely died for his country was twenty years old. This was the first one, nursed, fussed over, loved, who had died at this hospital. He was the parish hero. The bells started to ring again and the people

came out. The more seriously wounded, unable to accompany their dead comrade to his last resting-place, were taken back by the nurses to hospital. Lucienne and I watched all this sadly. We were gradually becoming cognizant of the war. The funeral we had seen that day was the first of many, but subsequently the red trousers of the mourners disappeared. Khaki or French blue replaced the gayer colours. The cap was shaped differently. Instead of the many flags on the coffin the parish supplied a large sheet dyed in the three colours which was used over and over again, and the processions moved along at a much quicker pace. Then came the first air raids. *Taubes* glittered unmolested over Paris and we were told they dropped poisoned sweets for the children. We looked up at them with much interest and I do not remember feeling afraid. In October the schools started a new term and once more my mother, in tears, led me off by the hand. I asked her why she cried so, thinking, of course, that it was entirely because of me, but she answered with a touch of annoyance that she was thinking of her son, remembering that occasion in 1912. Several mistresses were in the room when we arrived. The headmistress would have a few words with the mother and then introduce her to the mistress in whose class her daughter would be. When it was my mother's turn to be introduced she was so upset that, after murmuring a phrase that nobody understood, she fled from the building, leaving me amongst my young companions who seemed just as lost as I was. One of the mistresses sounded a bell. We were formed into two rows and led off to our respective classes in rooms which had been sprinkled with water from a gardening can and then swept.

This was certainly the poorest of poor schools. Two classes were taught by the same mistress who sat at a desk midway between them. The little girls were on one side, the older girls on the other. I was put at a tiny desk. The furniture had been given piecemeal by various charitable ladies with the result that the pupils' desks were all of varying sizes. Mine, besides being small, was low. The girl next to me had an unusually tall one so that her feet, against the bar of her desk, were level with my eyes. She amused herself by dropping all sorts of things on my head.

However diligently I applied myself to my work, bending over



my copy-book, my companion's ill-shod feet burst into my line of vision, giving me eye-ache, headache, and stomach-ache. Mlle Allard, our mistress, was a Huguenot from the Savoy, and accordingly more fervently protestant than those in countries where this religion is not in the minority. She began lessons with a prayer after which two senior pupils handed round the hymn-books. We sang a great deal. My childish intelligence judged these hymns to be admirable. We picked ears of corn with Jesus in immense golden cornfields, we fought shattering battles against evil hordes, we walked miraculously over the sea holding Jesus' hand. Our Lord became such a real Person for me that I saw Him everywhere. He was a Shepherd, a School-master. He liked children and held His classes in the open air. What gentle hours I spent listening to Mlle Allard reading the Scriptures to us, explaining them with such simplicity! Her great and good soul overflowed into ours. She filled with contentment daughters of rag-and-bone men, stone-breakers, apaches, thieves, and drunkards whose tenderer feelings had been taken right out of them by misery and illness. I cried over the Passion. My sensitivity was beginning to make itself apparent. Mlle Allard scolded me, saying: 'He died but He rose again.'

I was tolerably happy at school but my throat gave me a lot of trouble. I ended by running such a high fever that I had to remain at home, and Dr. Lehman, a picturesque old Alsatian doctor, told me that I should have to have my tonsils out.

We went to the out-patients department of the Gouin Hospital where they still dealt with a few civilians in spite of the fact that they were so short of space that many seriously wounded soldiers were left to lie on the floor. I arrived with my mother in a dark room where a doctor took me on his knees and proceeded, without an anaesthetic or any sort of drug, savagely to hack at my throat. I howled with pain and scratched. A nurse scolded me. I kept on seeing this brutal wretch, a lamp attached to his forehead, thrusting curved scissors into my throat and then withdrawing them. At last, mastering me, he got to work properly. I could hear, though mad with pain, the snipping of tissues cut. This unbelievable torture lasted a matter of minutes or seconds. A nurse tied a towel round my neck and tipped me over a basin as if I had been a bundle of dirty washing. The blood gushed out. When they were tired of watching it flow they put a piece

of ice in my mouth, and giving me back to my mother told us to go home.

I groped my way out of the hospital, clinging close to my mother, my head bent into the towel. I could see nothing. I think my mother would have carried me but I was too big a girl now. Fortunately I slept till the next morning. When our old Alsatian doctor arrived my mother let fly at him, telling the poor old man what she thought of his cruelty in sending me to such a place. He said it cost money to have an anaesthetic and that we could never have paid for it. The operation had been appallingly done. I had fought bitterly. My throat had been torn in all directions. All my life I have suffered from it.

When I went back to school another little girl had taken my low desk and I was given the very tall one, inflicting on my neighbour the same vexation as I had previously suffered. One day Mlle Allard asked me if it was true that my mother was a dressmaker. My mother made her several blouses with which she was delighted.

In the middle of our school, which had the form of a tiny feudal city, was a structure made partly of planks and partly of stone. This was the church or, to be more exact, it had been the church, for it was now more or less in ruins, quite impossible to heat in winter, and had been abandoned at the beginning of the war in favour of a new church in the rue Gobert. The tumbledown structure was used by the pastor's wife on Mondays for her mothers' meetings.

Mothers and grandmothers arrived from the most curious places. Some were in weeds, all were in black. They were very poor, lame, blind, furrowed, horrible to look at like beggars on the steps of a cathedral. When they sang one heard their thin voices quaking on upper notes. They listened, some of them knitting, to a little talk. A few old clothes were handed round. At five those of us who had been specially good at our class work were chosen to help the woman in the canteen prepare the hot chocolate and cut the bread and butter. We served these poor wrecks proudly, happy to feel ourselves young, and quite certain that never, never would we become old and ugly women. When they had all eaten and drunk we would finish up the hot chocolate, whilst the pupils who had not been counted good enough to assist looked greedily at us through the dusty window.

The big girls in the class next to ours were taught by the headmistress, Mlle Zélie. Mlle Zélie was the daughter of a pastor of Montauban which is in the hot and sunny south. Excellently brought up, very trim about her person, a pretty waist, a boned lace collar holding erect her delicate neck, she had a fine air. Her blend of piety and coquetry was very charming. She was of violent temper like everybody from the *midi*, and resolutely led her girls forward to a love for God and their country which with her was so deep that she would have gladly become a martyr for the one or the other. We used to join her pupils at a certain hour every morning to sing, for she was an excellent musician. We sang hymns and patriotic songs, fervently, in quick succession, until one was tempted to wonder whether one would be required in womanhood to do anything else but sing. Examinations had no sort of importance for little girls in the middle of the war.

One morning I was wakened up by two loud kisses on my cheeks. My father was home on leave. He let me off school that day and we went together to market. I was very proud to have my soldier but he looked changed. In dark blue uniform, an old artillery cap as they wore in 1870, long upcurling moustaches, he appeared older and thinner. He was very unhappy in his fort and cursed the Italians who refused to make up their minds on whose side they would fight. After he had been at home a day or two he got tired of having nothing to do. In the afternoons we would see him slink off to the café for a game of cards. My mother was not pleased. Then he went back to Sospel and we went on as before.

About a month later my Uncle Louis came to see us. He had done rather well for himself, having been drafted, by the help of friends, to a safe job in a military hospital near Le Creusot. He brought Rolande with him as a sort of peace-offering because my Aunt Marie-Thérèse was anxious to make things up with my mother. He invited us to lunch at rue de Longchamps the following Sunday and my mother accepted.

Many of our old friends arrived in different circumstances. I mean, the war made them look tired and disillusioned. Rose was patiently waiting for news of her German lover. She could still not believe anything bad of him. Before others, at any rate, she would not admit the possibility of his having been a spy.

Her wounded heart longed for his polite affection and it was a sad sight to see her withering away. Hélène was there but her Raoul was at the front. Marie-Thérèse had received information from Marais that Laurent, Ermeline's husband, after having been on the list of missing for several weeks, had been discovered seriously wounded in a military hospital. My aunt and my mother were delighted to be together again and poured news into each other's ears.

From the Grand' Combe we had received a letter saying that Aunt Marie was dead and that Henri Toulouse and Ernestine were married. The wedding had been very simple because of Aunt Marie and the war. Henri Toulouse had closed his shop and gone off with his regiment. Ernestine was living with her parents. Uncle Ernest was working very hard in the mine which had become of much greater importance since so many had been overrun in the Pas-de-Calais. Indeed, miners from the north had been sent there.

These things, of course, I had known when my mother first received the letter. What had saddened me was to hear that nobody mentioned Louis Verdier.

## IO

HERE arrived one day at home a little man who took me on his knees and kissed me on both cheeks. He spent the whole day with us. He was Cousin Prosper Nègre, related to us on my father's side, who had left the Grand' Combe many years earlier to settle in Paris where he had bought a small hotel with a wine and café-bar.

Cousin Prosper was a very pious man, his church-going having been inculcated into him, I fancy, by Cousin Catherine whose son, you will remember, was a priest. Prosper's hotel quickly made money. On the first floor women of a certain world slept throughout the day; then at night, looking very pretty, went out into the streets. The rooms on the higher floors were occupied by male shop assistants and bank clerks. Cousin Prosper, his pockets full of money, was on the point of returning to his native Grand' Combe when the devil took hold of him. He fell in love with his servant-girl who was delighted to see this man of fifty suddenly starting to sow his wild oats. She quickly gave him a child. His fortune began to run through her fingers and her conduct was so bad that he was not even certain that the child was his. She had persuaded him to make over a great deal of his money at the time of the marriage. He was imposed upon, deceived, ruined, and cheated in love. Worst of all, for a man so religious, he was obliged to institute proceedings for divorce. He had come to see us before returning penniless to his sunny birthplace. Sadly to my mother and to me, a little girl, he made a *mea culpa*. He had earned a small fortune by closing his eyes to prostitution and encouraging men to drink in his wine shop, and these two vices had taken revenge on him in the person of his wife. He had perished from their sharp arrows.

Cousin Prosper was going home that night, travelling as my father and I had done, third class. We watched him as he went down the street, his back bent with sorrow and remorse.

We were at the beginning of a hard winter and my mother feared the dampness of our apartment for my frail health.

One afternoon Marguerite Rosier called on us with her sister Lucie, the one with whom the aunt from Rheims had gone to live, but the aunt had decided to accept a position as house-keeper to a priest where she felt more useful, living at nobody's expense. Lucie, having four children and a husband who was in the regular army, had been given the enviable post of *conciierge* at a magnificent villa at St. Cloud. She lived in the grounds in a gay lodge and her only duties were to keep an eye on the villa which was not lived in. Just now she was expecting her husband to arrive on leave and she was anxious for my mother to make her a blouse.

She was a big woman, dark, with blue eyes, pretty but with no waist, and short. She was terribly quick, could sweep and clean a room in no time, giving the furniture a polished appearance which was very pleasant in a house. She was dreadfully in love with her husband. She believed he loved nobody but her. He, the wicked man, was naturally inconstant. He would only arrive at home after most of his leave had been spent with a mistress. He would give his wife one magnificent day, spend all her savings, beat his eldest daughter Alice whom he considered ugly and useless, put his wife pregnant, and then hurry back to his regiment.

Whilst Lucie was singing the praises of her husband and laughing at Hyacinthe whom she could not stand my mother was cutting and sewing her blouse, trying it on, or serving coffee to go with the biscuits that Lucie had specially brought.

Lucie talked about the war expertly, conscious that she was the wife of a regular soldier. She wanted to make herself look important and well informed, but when she boasted rather too much about her military knowledge Marguerite said to her:

'My dear Lucie, instead of worrying about your husband's regiment you would do better to buy a new corset. You're getting as round as a barrel, and when Maurice comes on leave he won't want to make you that fifth child!'

Lucie, dear soul, laughed, but taking up the tape-measure rolled like a snail on the table she measured her young elephant's waist. That started us all off. We measured our waists. Lucie was genuinely unhappy, but when my mother had finished the blouse, seeing it so fresh, so pretty, so delicate, her blue eyes

became bluer still and we all forgot her waist in the sweetness of her expression.

It was decided that after Maurice's leave my mother and I would spend a few weeks with Lucie and her children at St. Cloud. Mother would do a lot of sewing to pay for our keep. My school could wait till winter was over.

That evening, after saying good-bye to our guests, I had to tell my mother that I was not feeling well. All the afternoon, contrary to her nature, she had been so full of laughter and happiness that finding me so flushed and hot she blamed herself for not keeping a better eye on me. She began to call me her 'little rabbit,' and whenever I heard her use that appellation I knew I was in for a serious illness. I tossed in my bed; I scratched; then exhausted I fell into a troubled sleep. In the morning I felt well, but in the evening the same thing happened. My mother, curiously enough, was not well herself and she began to scratch. Then it was Lucienne. Then Marguerite.

As I was the worst my mother sent for Dr. Lehman, the Alsatian doctor. He arrived in a black gig drawn by a very old horse that was so accustomed to waiting for its master that it automatically put its forelegs on the pavement and kept off the flies by lazy flicks of its tail. When it felt it had waited long enough it would give gentle taps of its hoofs like a ballerina. If the doctor still did not come his horse would change its tactics and behave itself like an angry, petulant little boy. Dr. Lehman would hear it, even if he had his ear against the chest or the back of a patient. One would see him rise slowly and, taking his note-book, his pen, and a tiny phial of ink which he kept clipped to a pocket of his pale grey satin waistcoat, write out the prescription in a deliberate, slow, slanting hand which, in spite of the care he took, was always quite unreadable. Then he would sign the prescription. My mother would hand him a five-franc piece, or cartwheel, large as the obsolete English crown. This was his fee. We would bend out of the window to see him drive off. As he emerged from our house he would call out: 'Well, Coco, have I really been as long as all that? Very well, Coco, let's go home!' He would climb up painfully, gripping with a veined hand the edge of the black hood which, folded back during the air alarms, showed the threadbareness of the moleskin and looked

like the black bonnet of a beggar woman. He sat down, took the reins, passed the whip through his fingers, and then laid it against his shoulder in which position it rose amusingly above his bowler hat in the form of a very thin feather. They would then set off, the horse as old as the master. This war was giving them the evening of their lives. The doctor had been spared for his patients; the horse for his master.

Dr. Lehman told us we had a horrible disease but one which was not serious. We had scabies or the itch. There was an epidemic amongst the soldiers at the front and the refugees who continued to crowd into Paris. We would not be ill long but we would have to go to the skin diseases hospital, the famous St. Louis, for we needed to have a certain ointment put all over us.

A long queue of women and children had been waiting for hours when we arrived. They all had the itch. There were women of all conditions, women wearing hats, bread-carriers, middle-class women, and beggar women, all itching and scratching.

The woman next to us had already come for treatment. 'This is what happens,' she said. 'The department we go to there are only women. We all have to be naked—as naked as the back of the hand. Then a nurse comes along with a scrubbing brush and yellow soap. After that she puts sulphur ointment on you and when you're all sticky and stink like a cheap match, you try to put your clothes on again.' Other women in the queue had turned round, listening. She went on: 'Wait till you hear the kids yell and the women who have it on the breasts! I'm all right. I've only got it on the stomach and the arms.'

My mother, that model of bashfulness and modesty, waited to hear no more. She took me by the hand and hurried home.

She had learnt exactly what to do. We bought a soft hair-brush and a large quantity of ointment. In the evening she made me stand in the washtub and she started to pass the brush over my body. I shrieked with pain and she cried to hurt me so. In the end I realized she was suffering more than I was and I bit my lips to keep quieter. My eyes were filled with tears. I could not see out of them. The ointment was another martyrdom. My mother wrapped me up in an old sheet, but as I then looked as if I were all ready to be put in my coffin she took it off and



gave me a night-dress. She painfully went through the same treatment, but I was asleep by the time she had finished.

Dr. Lehman came back to see us. He was not pleased to have to treat this malady at home. We were very unhappy, for we could not visit Marguerite and Lucienne Rosier. We had to talk to them through the window. Lucienne was already well again, having had it very lightly.

In due course, when we were getting better, Dr. Lehman advised us to go to the public baths where we could take a sulphur bath. We set off with a change of clothing. The attendant ran the bath, gave us a clean towel, and left us to ourselves after my mother had slipped her a penny for herself.

I undressed first, and bathed in yellow water smelling of rotten eggs; then my mother, having taken her clothes off discreetly in a corner, came forward to step in after me. But even in front of me she would have been ashamed to show herself naked. She arrived, therefore, in a chemise which, as soon as she touched the warm water, rose like a balloon. I laughed shamelessly to see her try to bring it down with both hands. Later we took starch baths. The water was white and soft and smelt good. My mother, having become modern, made herself a sort of bathing dress, but not covering her breasts which she said I had seen often enough when she was feeding my small brother. At last we were cured, but as nearly always happens in epidemics the children suffer most, and in this case I remained extremely weak.

Hyacinthe was working at the bank on Sundays now for which he received double pay. His savings were growing; he computed what they would be in so many years at compound interest. He had become insatiable. He had rolls of golden louis which he refused to give up to war savings but he was terrified that they would be stolen. He started by keeping them at the bank, but having taken fright at a remark which in reality had nothing to do with him, he brought them back to Clichy, not sleeping for fear that our apaches might get to know about his treasure.

Occasionally when the secret was too much for him alone he would confide in his wife, but immediately afterwards he would be sorry he had told her and would be obliged to change the hiding-place. One day she threw away a box of pills she had found at the top of a dusty cupboard. When Hyacinthe came home he made an atrocious scene and spent the evening going

through the garbage cans until he remembered that he had recently taken the gold from the box she had thrown away and put it in another hidden under the wash-stand. Marguerite was even more afraid of his joy than she had been of his despair.

On the first Sunday that I was well again, Hyacinthe being at his bank, Marguerite brought Lucienne to spend the day with us. My Aunt Marie-Thérèse and Rolande also came to lunch. My mother had told them how amusing Marguerite could be, how full of fun, and they were looking forward to meeting her. Unfortunately Marguerite was not at her best. Hyacinthe had exhausted her the previous evening with a terrible quarrel about his gold.

Lunch was not particularly successful for the women, therefore. For us children it was a success. Rolande and I had dressed Lucienne up. We then borrowed my mother's high heels and each in turn pretended that we were on a visit with our daughter. The daughter was Lucienne. While my mother was serving coffee Mme Maillard, Marguerite's mother, arrived accompanied by her new husband, M. Malgras, the former baker. We were all delighted to see a new face. M. Malgras had fresh, pink cheeks which looked as if they had been lately scrubbed. His eyes were full of life, and when he discovered that he was the only man amongst so many females he set out to charm us all. His politest shop manners came forward. One might have supposed a fairy had taken ten years off his age. He smiled and beamed and distributed compliments, and gallantly suggested that we should allow him to take us all for a stroll in the avenue.

We went off in great style, women and girls tripping along in the wake of this rejuvenated old gentleman who was bursting with joy and vanity. We drank some beer at the terrace of a café and M. Malgras gave us, the children, money to buy *croissants* at the baker's. The outing brought Marguerite back to her jolly self. Suddenly we saw coming towards us a young English soldier, fair-haired, fresh shaven, beautifully clean-looking in his khaki uniform. He was accompanied by a young Frenchwoman and the efforts he made to speak French made him still more irresistibly attractive. We all thought he was as handsome as a young god. Our eyes followed him as he passed. Our hearts beat for the love of him. Our tongues let forth a melody of praise. M. Malgras tried hard to interest us in the amazing happenings of his former bakery; we ceased to listen to him.

He let slip the expression 'when I was young.' That did it. The spell departed. His shoulders drooped, his mouth sagged, his eyes lost their brightness. He became rather a silly old man. He looked round in despair. He was beaten and should never have taken out all these females. We saw him yawn. Mme Maillard, now Mme Malgras, paid for the beer, and we got up with no more poetry in our hearts.

This was the first time I had seen an English soldier. I made a queer resolution, to marry an Englishman. I confided this to my mother the same evening as I was going to bed. 'The point is,' she queried, 'are they any better than ours? Men promise so much and give so little.' I did not pay great attention to her and when I dreamed that night I believe I dreamed in English!

During the second week in October we took the tram-car as far as Asnières, and another one from there to St. Cloud. The little estate where Lucie was *concierge* was quite a way from the centre of St. Cloud, along the towing-path. Our parcels were very heavy and all the houses facing the lazy, wide river seemed alike, magnificent iron gates, tall trees browned by autumn, curled-up leaves smelling damp, eddying at our feet. I picked up some leaves and filled my lungs with the autumnal odour. The Seine was beautiful and deserted, barges idle along the muddy bank. At last we arrived. There was a bell in the gate. We pulled it and it tinkled amongst the distant trees. Young steps ran over hidden gravel and then we saw a little boy who opened to us with both hands saying:

'We 've been waiting for you. How old is your little girl?'

Lucie arrived, very fat, with her youngest child in her arms.

'You 're late,' she said affectionately. 'Dédé was impatient.'

Dédé was, of course, the little boy. My mother followed Lucie into the lodge and Dédé and I were given permission to run away.

Dédé, more properly André, was ten, fair, pale, slender, but quick. As he only went to school from time to time he was as ignorant as I, but we were both extremely inventive when it came to playing. Gentle and patient, mostly playing by himself, he was overjoyed to have me.

The garden was enormous with curving lawns whose grass, not mown, was turning brown at the tip, gravel-walks that crunched underfoot, tall trees, and a stone wall round the lodge.

This wall was full of secrets. There grew against it ivy, climbing roses, and other plants. Birds and snails lived in the crevices. By following it we came upon another which divided the estate from the towing-path, a tower built upon it in which there was a spiral staircase, a room on the upper floor containing rustic chairs, and a table and from which, when we were sitting there, we could see the Seine flowing past.

This belvedere soon became our castle. We hid all our treasures in it and nobody ever came to disturb us. From early morning we were there, whatever the weather, and only when we heard the tinkling bell of the great iron gate did anybody see us, and then we tumbled and ran, out of breath and terribly curious. This same bell, rung by Lucie in a manner we recognized, brought us turbulent and hungry to our meals.

The lodge reminded me of a transfer picture, but so small that Lucie and her husband might in normal times have found it rather difficult to pack their family inside. A dining-room, a kitchen, and a bedroom comprised the ground floor above which there was nothing but a sweetly sloping roof. The dining-room table was round and covered with an oilcloth upon which a full pack of cards in colour was designed. We ate in turn upon the king of diamonds, the knave of clubs, or the ten of hearts. Lucie refused to have her meal upon the queen of spades, who was bad news, or the queen of diamonds—the flippant woman, the woman of bad character, the traditional enemy. The knave of spades, whom she called the ‘dog of spades,’ was malevolent and underhand. Alice, the eldest daughter, aged fifteen, planned manœuvres worthy of a great general to find herself in front of the knave of hearts—a beautiful young man, dignified and clever, about whom she dreamt and who, one day, would marry her, taking her miles away from her parents and the brothers and sisters she was obliged to look after. She was in the ungraceful age and was conscious of her awkwardness. Though small she already had breasts that rose to her chin and a large posterior. As soon as she tried to draw one in the other became more apparent. She was unhappy, but her mind was crammed with dreams, hopes, and desires. Lucie, who was only sixteen when she had given birth to her, now found her slightly embarrassing, seeing in her many of her own defects, and was worried this girl would go wrong.

My mother and I had immediately set to work to make a dormitory of a large room above the stables. A steep and quaint ladder led to it. My mother, Alice, Dédé, and I slept in this delightful remove. Dédé and I were not long in going to sleep but often, beforehand, I would hear Alice asking my mother:

‘Tell me, Matilda, do you suppose I shall remain as ugly as this for long?’

My mother would gently pass in review all the young women she had known as young girls and she would end like this:

‘You know, it’s always the same. At fifteen you would see them without a waist, the nose askew, pimples on the face, and then, two years later, hey presto! you would meet them again and they had waists so thin you could span them in your two hands, a skin like peach bloom, and a Greek nose!’

Alice would sigh and answer:

‘But fancy having to wait two years!’

My mother sewed. She remade entirely her friend Lucie’s wardrobe and did what she could with Alice’s misshapen form. The lady of the house, before going to the *midi* where her husband, a celebrated aeroplane designer, was working in a factory, had left Lucie many clothes for herself and the girls. These my mother also arranged.

Every two or three days we all went together into the big house to open the windows. We skated along the parquet floors and sat in the arm-chairs. We slid down the banisters and crept wide-eyed into the cellars where the central heating was built, machines that we pretended were the turbines of a great liner.

Just before Christmas Lucie had a telegram to say her husband was wounded. She left with the baby she was breast-feeding. Alice was delighted to find herself at last at the head of the family.

The forest of St. Cloud was full of soldiers, and we had discovered a door in the wall through which we could reach their tents. They would give us hunks of army bread which we thought excellent, and it was Alice who always led these expeditions. I suspect that her main motive was to ascertain if her ungainliness was passing sufficiently for her to make any impression on the soldiers, for she began to laugh less wildly and to make fewer efforts to hide her posterior and her breasts. For André and me these walks in the forest were magnificent. Hand in hand

we would press forward, imagining all sorts of things. Then when we came home we would find that my mother had made a great bowl of apple fritters sprayed with sugar. In a moment the table was arranged. Alice would have her plate on the knave of hearts; my mother would take the king of hearts, a gentleman of middle age, excellent situation, probably a business man; and we would leave the queen of spades at a safe distance. Without saying as much we probably thought that it had a message for Lucie who would become a war widow. After the feast I would sew for my doll, but not for long. Dédé and I, drunk with the air of our long walk, would soon find our little heads drooping over the cards on the oilcloth.

Lucie came back to us for Christmas. Maurice had only been slightly wounded but had told her the most dreadful stories of trench warfare. Christmas was delightful, a few toys and some real snow. The garden, the park, the forest, looked quite different.

When winter was over how marvellous the arrival of spring!

With April all the lilac came out in flower; the air was heavily alive with it. Over every wall gently waved billowing clouds of white and mauve. André and I had an idea. We picked as much as we could carry and then let ourselves out by the door in the wall. After a little while I began to say: 'Oh, the lovely lilac, freshly picked!' The more distant we were from home, the louder I spoke. A workman going home on his bicycle stopped, took several branches which he tied to his handlebars, gave me a few sous, and went off to beflower his house. A man hurrying past hesitated, took André's entire armful, and left him with three sous in his little hand. Soon we had no lilac left. We slipped home unseen, but at supper our two mothers had little trouble, seeing us so elated, to draw our secret out of us. They were amazed but not angry. They took six sous from us, left us two, and we were happy. The following Sunday my mother and Alice made us up some fine branches and sent us into the town. I sold all mine to various women outside the military hospital. I thought I had found my vocation—to be a flower-girl. Alas, the lilac was soon over. Rain fell, and the room where we slept above the stables was requisitioned. A soldier, a real peasant in uniform, arrived with a large white horse. The white horse broke its tether, and having wandered into the

passage where the steep ladder led to our bedroom was unable either to proceed or to turn back. My mother and I had been upstairs. We could not get down because of the horse. Lucie arrived, caught sight of us, and broke into laughter. She tried to tell the soldier what had happened, but every time she opened her mouth she laughed louder. The unfortunate peasant thought she was bedevilled, but when he noticed that his horse was stuck in the passage his features took on such an expression of alarm that Lucie's hilarity increased. In the end he went off to find six other soldiers who released the horse and us.

Italy was now in the war. The forts on the Alps were accordingly vacated. My father was sent to the front from which he sent us the most poignant letters. For the first time he was unable to use his fists. He complained of being attacked without seeing the aggressor. He managed—I am not quite sure how—to get himself transferred to a field kitchen; then one day whilst he and some other men were sweeping the floors they began to fence with their broom handles. My father received one of the sticks in an eye. He was sent to the field hospital, from the field hospital to the base, where they told him his eye was lost. As a result he was sent home.

We had left St. Cloud. My health had much improved and during the long winter I had not had a single cold. Paris was very busy, full of English soldiers and extremely gay. War factories were expanding. The Séguins were both in work, one on the night shift, the other on the day. Their daughter Germaine came home on her eighteenth birthday and went to work with her mother. Taller than when we had seen her last, very pretty, she wore a long black overall with red buttons and had high-heeled shoes. She earned a great deal of money, refused to discuss her operation, and was waiting to be twenty-one to be free. She would often visit us, especially when Marguerite Rosier was there, and to see her so gay, so easily amused, such a charming companion, it was hard to realize that she had been the centre of such a sombre story. Mme Séguin seldom left her; if Germaine was indisposed or for some other reason did not go to work her mother would stay at home to look after her. On Sunday evenings my mother, Germaine, and I used to take a stroll along the Avenue de Clichy to watch the picturesque crowds. We would have something to drink at the terrace of a

café, and then Germaine could not help looking enviously at the women walking up and down or waiting at street corners, to whom in thought and desire she was still bound by malevolent and powerful ties.

My father worked in a shell factory on the banks of the Seine. One day after he had been there several months I came back to lunch and found the apartment empty. Marguerite Rosier gave me lunch with Lucienne and told me that my father, injured by the snapping of a taut cable, had been placed on some straw and brought back to my mother in a horse-drawn cart. They had first tried to take him to the Gouin Hospital, but as he had a fractured leg they would not admit him, this being apparently out of their sphere. He had now been taken to Beaujon in Paris. I was in a sad state. My mother came back during the afternoon with my father's clothes which she folded. There fell out two small pieces of flat, highly polished wood which had served to support my father's leg and which I turned that same evening into shelves for my doll's cupboard.

We visited my father twice a week, on Thursdays and Sundays, setting forth very early, burdened with a basket of food but mostly wine, and waiting for the big gates to open. Unless we were the first to enter the ward when it was thrown open to visitors my father, tied down to his bed, worked himself up into a towering rage, saying that we were abandoning him. He suffered a lot of pain and passed it off on us with the result that our visits to the hospital became veritable nightmares. We stood at the side of his bed feeling very uncomfortable, my mother tidying his provision cupboard, putting away the wine she so hated the sight of. When the bell rang for us to go we ran gaily down the stairs, elated at the thought of having three clear days before us. We used to go home by the Avenue des Ternes, skirting the fortifications, my mother advancing with tiny quick steps, I running in circles or playing with a hoop.

Sometimes Marie-Thérèse and Rolande came to see us on Sundays and then we would drag them to the hospital. On one such occasion a beautiful woman wearing a long tight skirt walked gracefully towards a very young man whose legs had been crushed by a tram-car. This woman made a tremendous impression on me. I saw in her all the elegance of a world outside mine. The first time, a wide velvet hat of a warm red was



poised at the most graceful angle over her peroxide hair. I dreamed about her. My visits to the hospital now had a purpose, to see this magnificent creature who had a new hat or a new dress on each occasion. Her face, much made up for those days, haunted me. Standing by my father's bed, my eyes fixed on the door, I awaited her arrival. Once she smiled at me and I felt myself swaying with emotion. It was a wonder I did not faint. When Rolande and I walked home we pretended we were the beautiful lady.

At last my father began to walk on crutches but the leg was to take a long time to mend. My mother wondered anxiously if he would ever work again. Our reserves were dangerously low.

## II

**M**ME Gaillard had written asking us to come and see her, and as it looked as if my mother would have to start working again we went as soon as possible to the Boulevard Haussmann.

We found her at the stand again set up, a few blouses and some lace in the best box, but she herself in deep mourning, her son having died. She had begun to work again to console herself, but she had found already that money was not in the same hands. Fashion also had changed. I did not see her husband, the doorkeeper. He was ill in bed.

That afternoon it was raining and Mme Gaillard was closing early. She invited us to the little café-bar where for thirty years she had carried out all her transactions. She told us that she was just now doing the rounds of the old curiosity shops looking for lace, and she showed us some from Russia which was delicate and pretty, so full of minute detail that she was continually bringing it out from a pocket in an underskirt to admire it at leisure and discover new angles of its beauty. She said that she would not sell this piece until she had learnt all about it and made it as familiar to her eye and hand as Valenciennes. She had also found some lace bonnet crowns worn by the peasants of Nohant where Mme George Sand lived, the scene of so many of her finest country books like *The Little Fadette*. She had great patience, looking into every shop, walking sometimes miles through the streets, and though it exhausted her physically this was what she wanted to keep her mind off the loss of her son. Of course, no other woman in all Paris could have told so accurately, at a glance, exactly where a strange lace came from and what it was called. She kept on saying that it was a terrible thing to have worked so hard for her son and to think that now he was dead. Her husband, the doorkeeper, also was dying like his poor plants. For so many years she had yearned to buy a house in her native Auvergne where she could retire, and now that she had the money, just see what had happened! She was too old to enjoy it.

Mme Valentin also, it appeared, was in a bad way. She missed the Paris open-air markets, and worried to distraction about her son Louis who was in the front line. Mme Gaillard told us many other details about Mme Valentin, but they were also of the most depressing nature. We left her and tried to brighten our afternoon by looking at all the pretty things in the *Galleries Lafayette*.

As my father remained in bed all day mother and I lived in the kitchen. I had a passion for ironing and I was given the handkerchiefs to do. Mme Maillard, Marguerite's mother, having ironed for a laundrywoman, would give me lessons when she looked in. You should have seen her take a handkerchief, stretch the corners, fold it, hit it with the iron. For a handkerchief to be ironed perfectly it had to remain rigid, in its folds, when one took it up. I think the art of ironing as it was done in Paris in those days has quite disappeared. Nobody to-day realizes what sorcery these women had in their fingers, how their irons ran and beat and curved with a speed and a deftness that came from secrets handed down and hours and hours of practice. What miracles one can do with heavy old-fashioned irons heated on coals or on the gas-ring! Pleats form themselves magically all down night-gowns or lingerie; blouses stand up like living things! To sew quickly and deftly (with a thimble) and to iron like these Paris women used to are the loveliest gifts that a woman can have.

My father liked to have Lucienne in the room with him, and she liked him also, calling him 'father Mimile.' Though she was normally impatient she would play contentedly by the side of his bed. My father's strength was still enormous and he could take Lucienne in his powerful arms and, the lower part of him tied down to the bed because of the plaster, make her do what he called the 'trapeze' act. The child, having in Hyacinthe a father who was lame, sickly, always engrossed in dreams of avarice, much admired my father who could throw her so easily from hand to hand. He also taught her to sing in the patois of the *midi*. My mother and I took advantage of their friendliness to run off to market where the Belgian refugees, selling their specialities, gave it a new charm. These people were so tireless and pushing that they quickly captured the trade. There were moments when we forgot the growing difficulties at home. On a fringe of the market there were street singers, a woman sang and a child

played the accordion. We would hear the latest songs of love and war, and there would be an appreciative audience, for the woman had a deep, sensuous voice. When she finished an air the child went round selling the words and music which we bought and learned on the way home. If Marguerite was with us we would each try to memorize a verse. At home, making the lunch, we would hum the tune. Later in the day, anxious to bring it out again, we would discover that it had escaped our memory. Marguerite would be just as silly. A couple of days later when we were engaged on something quite different she would hurtle down the stairs, two at a time, crying out: 'I've got it! I've got it!' and she would sing us our ditty which we would take up for the rest of the week while washing, ironing, or sewing.

Hyacinthe now wore a tailcoat at the bank. He went to the hairdresser at regular intervals and put on a clean shirt. He was becoming more and more important. His former colleagues who went back to the bank during their leaves from the front could not believe their eyes. Of course, they were young and very good-looking and had enormous success with the girls, but all this did not somehow compensate for seeing Hyacinthe climbing to success. Nevertheless they went humbly to pay their respects to him, for it would not have been wise to forget the coming back to the bank after the war. Marguerite was longing to move to a better flat. There were some very modern ones further along the avenue which we often admired during our walks, and one day when we were all out together she took us to the building she liked best and asked the *concierge* to show us a vacant apartment.

We were taken to the fifth floor. The staircase was wide and clean. The entrance to the flat was very pretty, with a bell. The dining-room had a balcony wide enough for a whole family to sit out on warm evenings and look down upon what was happening in the street. There was also a private w.c. instead of having to use a general one at the bottom of the house. We were all in a state of wonderment, and Marguerite, dizzy with emotion, not even waiting for her husband's permission, gave some money to the *concierge*, saying she would take the flat. On the way home her courage sank.

She was helped by the most singular good fortune.

Quite a serious affray took place during the night between a band of apaches and a tenant. A revolver shot was fired.

Hyacinthe, terrified, already imagined himself wounded and unable to go to his beloved bank. At breakfast he was white. Marguerite said to him:

'You see, Hyacinthe, that it's not worth being so successful at your bank if you end by being shot in your own home like a rabbit. We simply must move to another building. This one is no longer safe. The police have been called in. There are deserters in the house. I wouldn't be surprised if next time several people were shot. Oh, my poor Hyacinthe, I pity you! Having a chance to become director of the bank and to end with a bullet in your head! It's too sad!'

Hyacinthe was trembling. He said in a low voice:

'How do you expect me to go flat hunting, I who work every moment of my life? Women are all the same. They leave everything to the men!'

Then Marguerite, magnanimously:

'Listen, Hyacinthe, if you think it's my duty, I could try. That would be the only way. Your life depends on it.'

Hyacinthe went off, limping even more because of the exhaustion of his poor body due to a sleepless night and mental agitation. Marguerite smiled. Like a great general she had won her battle. She would have a dining-room, a parquet floor, and a w.c.

My mother was in despair. Marguerite was moving resolutely towards a life of greater ease and sunshine. Her future and that of Lucienne were being guaranteed by a husband who, however ridiculous in certain ways, was a hard worker, a serious man in his private life, not a drunkard. Marguerite would go to her better life leaving us in despair with no savings and no money coming in for the moment except what my mother was able to earn with her needle. And then there was the loneliness of it! My mother would no longer have a friend to talk to while she was ironing or sewing. The days would be unending again, as in her early married life. The Séguins were always in the factory.

The great removal took place the following Sunday. Hyacinthe hired a donkey-cart and put himself between the shafts, a leather strap round his waist, limping, limping, but a model of courage. Behind the cart my father, limping, pushed and talked. They did the trip a number of times—to the church and then round the board schools to the rue Souchal. That was the name of the street where they were to live. Marguerite, my mother, and I put

the crockery in Lucienne's pram and made the journey several times too. Later the men turned their attention to the cellar and took the wine cask. My father complained that it was heavy. He did not like to see it leave the house and thought that if it must go, it would be easier to drain the best part of it:

My father went back to work, just a few hours a week at first and then gradually more till he did a full shift. My mother and I spent many hours with Marguerite who was a little lost in her beautiful apartment. Lucienne and I would sit on the balcony trying to peep into the neighbours' windows. When my mother and I went home in the evening we had fits of depression. The walls were damp. The paper was peeling off. The rooms were so small. My mother began to talk over supper about the desirability of moving into a modern flat. My father said he was quite happy where he was. He liked the garden on the opposite side of the road where he could sit in the summer, but he liked better his favourite café where he played cards with the regulars. Since his accident he had made new friends. He therefore went more frequently to the café. Often he came home very late, and when my mother reproached him he picked quarrels that day by day became more violent. He would take what happened to be on the table, the stew or the soup, and hurl it into the courtyard. When his anger subsided he would go to bed, but we, shaking with fear, sat at the table in front of empty plates. My mother sobbed without noise. She has always wept silently. I would try to sleep, but often I woke up with nightmares, my forehead bathed with perspiration.

One Sunday when Marie-Thérèse and Rolande were there my father became so violent that they left the house, refusing to come again to see us. My father was forty-three. My mother was not yet thirty. My father could drink little now without losing control of himself. My mother spent the whole of that night on a chair, crying and turning things over in her mind. When my father got up to go to work he saw her shivering with cold in the cruel, pale, early hours before dawn. He probably felt ashamed of himself but he did not know how to make excuses. His language was not sufficiently rich in words or suppleness. I don't think strong men ever make excuses to a woman. He came to kiss me, a thing he never failed to do, and then went off.

My mother then went to bed and slept till eleven. She began making parcels of her things and of mine. After lunch we went to Marguerite's flat taking some of the parcels with us. We then went back for more. My mother sat on the chair where she had spent the night, looking round her. There were things which still reminded her of her baby son, a watch, for instance, hanging up by a silver chain which he had taken to pieces one day, sitting with his legs crossed under him, a very serious expression on his face. My mother was passing the last years in review. There was the cretonne of the hanging cupboard behind which Marguerite hid when she heard the horses' hoofs. There were some toys of mine, a portrait of the actress Réjane and one of Sarah Bernhardt in the role of Aiglon. Poor little mean room in which, since we had taken away our personal things, so little seemed to be left. My mother got up, cried, rummaged, and finally taking my school exercise book wrote on a page:

'Émile, as you continue to make life impossible for us by your anger, I shall take my daughter away. She is all I have left. We are leaving you for ever. Do not try to find us.

MATILDA.'

She put this white page in the middle of the oilcloth on the kitchen table, read it over in a sobbing voice, and led me out by the hand.

We had arranged to spend the night with the Rosiers. The next day we would go to my grandmother at Blois.

I had quite a nice afternoon playing with Lucienne who was only five and very sweet. We had a great deal of trouble making her understand that if my father came she was not to tell him that we were hiding in the flat. At seven we saw my father coming down the street, his bad leg still rather stiff, but he was moving quickly as if in a hurry. From my place on the balcony I could only see his back. It was his back that gradually, moving up and down, full of sad expression, reached the end of the street, then turned out of sight in the avenue. My heart thumped. Something stuck in my throat and I silently wept.

My mother was anxious. Both of us started to imagine each thing my father would do. First he would go by the little garden opposite our house, then cross the road. He always wiped his boots before coming in. At our door he would knock. This

evening as nobody would answer he would have to take the key out of his pocket and let himself in. That is when he would see the page out of my copy-book. Tears would roll down his manly cheeks. I knew he would cry and cry. After that he would rush off to Marie-Thérèse.

I was wrong. He came to Marguerite. My mother and I, hiding in a clothes cupboard, heard Marguerite tell him that she had not seen us all day. We kept very still not to give Lucienne an excuse for piping out that we were there all the time, in the dark, playing hide and seek. Lucienne said nothing, so my father went away. His *midi* accent was loaded picturesquely with sorrow. He limped down the five storeys. That was all.

I was miserable. Though I knew in my heart that my mother was right, I pitied my father, being already sufficiently a woman to feel my sentiments go out to the less strong. The day before I had seen my father, strong as Samson, in all his fury, but this evening he was weak and quite lost without his two women.

Hyacinthe was surprised to find us in his house, but he asked no questions and went straight down to the cellar where he spent most of the evening.

We went off very early in the morning and Hyacinthe carried our bags to the underground, for we had to cross Paris to take our train from the Quai D'Orsay. My mother was not only tired but anxious about the reception we would have at my grandmother's, and she would have warned her of our coming if she had not feared my grandmother would, if telegraphed to, have revealed our intentions to my father. We were doing a very serious thing. By law my father could make us both come back because of me. The law was very particular on this point. My mother would have been quite in the wrong. My father could even have demanded the custody of his child. He could have separated my mother and me.

The beginning of our journey was not very gay, therefore, but at Orleans I had forgotten most of our troubles and my nose was firmly fixed to the window pane—cornfields, poppies, and cornflowers. We were in the middle of flaming summer. Life looked tempting. We were going to the country at last. Clichy seemed a long way off and even my father was a little spot on the horizon which grew less and less important at every mile.

We reached Blois at about midday.



My grandmother at that time lived on the far bank of the Loire, in the rue Pontchartrain, a very old house, half town, half country, with a large main room having several beds, and a dark kitchen beyond which was a courtyard full of small cellars in which the tenants kept their wood, their coal, and the rabbits.

As she was not expecting us my grandmother was not at home, but the owner of the house gave us her key and we went in. The apartment smelt of dried earth, thyme, and mint. My mother began by taking off her large hat and sighing profoundly at the sight of this untidy room, the room of an old woman living all by herself, eating bits and pieces on the edge of the table, and who, never expecting anybody, never did anything to make the place look nice. We had bought some peaches and a French loaf on the way from the station and we now ate in silence. I hazarded a few questions but my mother was thinking of something else. I was anxious to open the wicker basket in which I had brought a celluloid baby doll called Bambino, feeling, I think, that if I could rock somebody to sleep I should be less lonely. Bambino appeared as abandoned as I was in this strange house. I looked at the basket longingly but did not dare ask my mother to let me undo it, aware, in spite of my ten years, that my request would sound futile compared to the important problems which my mother was just now turning round in her head.

She was seated by the window, and the sun's rays entering the room set fire to her golden hair, giving her a wild, unnatural look. She emitted a deep sigh. Then undoing the hooks and eyes on the deep wristbands of her sleeves she turned them up with thoughtful care, not at all hurrying. She took a coarse blue linen apron from where it hung on a hook and placed it round her waist, after which she set about quickly doing the room. Suddenly, as if seeing me for the first time, she exclaimed rather harshly: 'Don't you think you could help?' I can still picture myself turning in circles, making great exertions, without knowing where to start. Provoked, my mother cried out: 'Run into the yard and look at the rabbits. You're useless here.'

She was undoing my grandmother's bed, having put two chairs side by side in front of the open window to air the sheets. With a jerk she raised the mattress at arm's length when there rolled out a large-size cocoa tin which seemed very heavy as it bumped on the uncarpeted floor. My mother took it up, opened

it, and saw that my grandmother had hidden her savings and a few jewels inside. Alarmed at having thus innocently violated my grandmother's secret she put back the box, remade the bed in a hurry, and sat down to wait.

The hours passed monotonously, but little by little a few neighbours went to their cellars in the courtyard, pretending to fetch wood or give food to the rabbits, but in reality to examine us and perhaps ask a few questions. My mother went out, exchanged a few words, and at last we heard a wheel grinding against gravel and saw my grandmother arriving behind her wheelbarrow full of herbs. She was very surprised to see us, kissed her daughter, and appeared enchanted at my apparition. 'How tall you are and pretty!' These words made me her slave for ever. In a way she also became mine.

My mother went close to her to say what was on her mind but the poor thing was appallingly deaf. One was obliged to take her by the neck and shout into the right ear, this one being the least deaf, and in this way she heard. My mother explained that she had brought me on a visit, but said nothing about my father, fearing my grandmother would send us back. After these few necessary words my grandmother, pushing her wheelbarrow into the courtyard, said: 'Come, we'll give some grass to the rabbits.' She proceeded to empty the wheelbarrow, bringing out from it many different kinds of grasses and herbs, an enamel saucepan full of holes, a lettuce, and a goat's cheese. She then hung the wheelbarrow up by the handles, fed the rabbits, and led me back into the big room where my mother was waiting for us. Here she opened a huge cupboard, brought out some sheets and pillow-cases, giving them to my mother to make up a bed for us on a very large, old-fashioned one in a corner, covered with a red eiderdown. My mother took the eiderdown and shook it out of the window. My grandmother went from one piece of furniture to another showing us where everything was, for being deaf she was suspicious and hid her belongings in nooks and corners she was not always able to remember herself. Going to a chest of drawers of heavy, ancient design, she drew out the top drawer which was rather high up, stood on her toes, plunged her hands inside, making mysterious faces, and suddenly out ran a fat mother mouse and her family of little ones. I let out a yell but my grandmother took on the same sort of expression as Don

Quixote probably did when he found himself in the presence of a wrinkled peasant woman instead of his imagined Dulcinea, and thereby believed that his enemies, the enchanters, had played him a new trick. Once my fright was over I think I was nearly as indignant as she was, though for an unconsidered reason except that having taken a liking to my grandmother I meant to defend her. My mother, curling her lips, did not hide her disgust.

After the goat's cheese and the red wine, my grandmother let us into the secret of her vast projects.

Mme Collinet, whose linen she washed in the Loire, helping her also to look after a house on the castle moat, was going to Paris to look after the affairs of her husband and her son who were in the army. The house which had many tenants would need somebody to keep an eye on it. Mme Collinet had chosen my grandmother for this position of trust suggesting that she should go and live there. Our arrival coincided almost exactly with the taking over of her functions. My mother would help with the moving in and do all the listening when people had something to say. We would have a pleasant apartment in the centre of the town, instead of being on the outskirts as now, and there was the market, one of the finest in all the Loire. My mother made no great comment. She had no choice in the matter and anything was preferable to going back to my father.

During the next few days my mother and I started to make packages once more, not only for ourselves but for my grandmother. Granny went off behind her wheelbarrow looking for things along the banks of the Loire. Occasionally also she went to wash on the planks in the middle of the shallow river.

I have already said that my grandmother's furniture was queer and old, but the things she kept in them were even stranger. Little shoes, tiny clogs, thimbles, medals, charms, pieces of coloured glass that she put close to an eye so that they coloured the objects seen through them. Her delight on these occasions was immense as if she had discovered a way of making all about her gayer, prettier, less monotonous. The rabbits became blue or violet. The grass we gave them to nibble took on equally absurd colours. Life appeared charmingly upside-down. I was enchanted. When we had spent enough time with these varying treasures we put them back in a silk handkerchief full of holes. Then Granny, who had a low voice in spite of her deafness, would

say in the most mysterious tone: 'I am going into the garden to cut some leeks for supper.' You would have thought she was going off on a secret mission.

My mother, because of so many things round us which reminded her of the days when she was little, began to speak about her father whose photograph, very faded, stood on a table in the picturesque 1870 uniform of a zouave. We were also led to talking about him owing to a discovery we made after Granny had gone to cut her leeks. My mother was poking about, rummaging, when she suddenly came on a long and wide red sash, holed by moth till it scarce held together, and a braided short jacket which together constituted her father's sash and bolero, the same as the zouave was wearing in the photograph.

My zouave grandfather, brought back to life by my mother's memories, came into my existence for the first time. He had died full of rheumatics and had been unlucky from childhood, just like her, she said. Nothing had ever worked out right for him.

Born in Colmar, miserably, he had twice sold himself for the wars. Military service in those days was by lottery. The youth who drew the unlucky number had seven years in the army, but if he was rich he could pay another man to take his place. My grandfather had obliged first one young man and then another. Fourteen years he battled, in the Crimea, with Faidherbe in Algeria, and during the campaigns in Italy, and lastly, of course, in the war of 1870 after which, returning to Colmar, he discovered that the city of his birth had become German by annexation. Deprived of his nationality he returned to the banks of the Loire where he had spent the later months of the doomed campaign. He fell in love with Juliette Lacoudrette, my grandmother, married her, and bought a grocery shop in the tiny village of Selles-sur-Cher where my mother was born.

Juliette was a trifle unbalanced, full of strange dreams, believing herself to be the love daughter of the village seigneur who would one day set her up in her proper station, invite her, dressed as Diana with a floating veil, to follow the chase with him, she mounted on a white horse, he on a black one. The tinkle of a little bell would bring her mind back to the pepper and the eucalyptus on the shelves of the tiny grocery store. A little woman all in black or a grubby child would come asking for a halfpennyworth of salt. She would give them too much change

or forget to take the money altogether, he led to give them twice the weight, and as soon as the door was closed go off dreaming again.

Three little girls were born of the marriage, Marguerite the eldest who had not yet come into my existence, Marie-Thérèse, and my mother Matilda. They were brought up in pretty frocks to lend substance to Juliette's dream. They had a pony and trap, but the trap soon broke up from want of care and the horse died. The grocer's shop was sold. Malevolent tongues drove the family out of the village, and Juliette, the rheumatic zouave, and the three little girls took refuge in the anonymity of Blois.

The zouave, old and tired by his campaigns, was hounded from place to place, people taking him for a German. My mother discovered in herself increasingly traits of his character. She had his honesty and hard work but in neither case did they lead anywhere. He gardened a little, broke stones on the road, and ended by choosing solitude. The three little girls had a sad childhood between a deaf and dreamy mother and a father embittered by ill fortune. Juliette alone was happy. At the break of each summer's day she would set off happily to look for hidden treasure, pushing her wheelbarrow for miles along the water bank or in the forest of Russy. She felt sure there was gold wrapped up in a pair of leather trousers buried in this forest. The great thing was to find it. One day she took Marie-Thérèse with her, Matilda remaining at home with the zouave, the eldest sister, though only twelve, being apprenticed to a dressmaker in the distant town of Vierzon. Juliette, searching the sweet-smelling ground for the leather trousers, left Marie-Thérèse sleeping at the foot of a tree in the forest and then quite forgot her. When she came home in the evening she was surprised not to find her daughter. They beat the forest for her all night but not till the next day did they find her, kneeling in prayer, her eyes glazed with terror. Nights of fever, delirium, convulsions, followed this appalling adventure, the little girl crying out that she could see the wolves. After being on the point of death for eight days she recovered. One eye was smaller than the other, a cheek slightly paralysed. Her lovely hats were always designed to cast a shadow over these defects.

When the two youngest went to school Marie-Thérèse was just old enough to lead Matilda by the hand and look the big

sister. My mother, who had never talked much about her childhood, gave me for the first time glimpses of the Ursuline convent where she received her education, the religious bodies having not yet been expelled from France. The whole thing was just as in the days of the French kings. The convent was divided into three distinct layers of human status—the nobility, the bourgeoisie, and the *tiers état*, or commonalty. Behind its high walls the convent was a city with its own laws, the cloistered nuns making their own bread, owning and milking their own cows, growing their vegetables and their flowers, and possessing their own burial ground. The young ladies of noble birth from the provinces or from Paris came here for their education. The chapel was divided into three parts, the titled young women praying on the right, the daughters of professional men or of those enriched by commerce in the centre, and poor girls, like my mother, on the left. The poor girls finished off the copy-books of the young ladies of quality and fell in love with the beautifully romantic names of those whose forbears made French history. My mother remembered specially Sophie de Cantre and Athenais de Grandchamps, about whom she later told me many stories. Occasionally, when the poor girls were playing in their miserable courtyard, the young ladies who lived in threw from upper windows texts and pious pictures which, thus released from white hands, fluttered to the feet of the poor girls who fought one another for these pious mementoes.

The Mother Superior went to Rome once a year, returning for Easter. She travelled in a Berlin, a four-wheeled carriage with a hood behind, comfortable, well sprung, and with curtains always closed. She had a thick veil over her features, was not allowed to get down even for requirements of hygiene, and her departure was accompanied by much picturesque ceremonial. All the pupils gathered in the main courtyard and knelt as the carriage went by. She blessed them, blessed the nuns, and very solemnly handed over the keys of the convent to her deputy. On her return she distributed relics blessed by the pope. She appeared in the splendour of a queen returning into her kingdom. The convent, the nuns, the divisions of classes, echoed monarchist France with its privileges, its fine sides also. Most little girls were too young to appreciate the historical interest of this strict community. My mother was merely aware of the discipline, the long litanies, the

prayers in a half-understood Latin, the hours kneeling on stone, arms in the form of a cross, draughts under doors, chill winter blasts from the Loire.

Holy Week was a long fast for children who, like Marie-Thérèse and my mother, were already underfed, seldom eating more than an apple and a handful of nuts. The nuns remained kneeling in ecstasy for several hours, would faint, and then, as soon as they were revived, take up again their rapturous attitude. Marie-Thérèse, much affected by what she saw, superimposed her growing religious feeling on what remained in her mind of the happenings in the forest. She claimed to have seen the Virgin Mary, either in the convent or at night when deliriously searching for Juliette. The wolves were temptation and the devil. She carried in her apron or the pockets of her dress many pious pictures, and soon the nuns began to consider her in the light of a potential recruit, for the poor girls could eventually be turned into excellent servants. As soon as school was over in the evening the little girls flew out of the convent and Marie-Thérèse and Matilda crossed the Loire, their empty luncheon baskets passed under their arms as in the pictures of Little Red Riding Hood. The brightly lit shops held them up all the way. They clattered down the steps of the rue Denis Papin, lost their hearts to a box of chalks, a doll, or a shuttlecock, admired a hat or a parasol, envied grown-ups who drank at the café terrace, read the play-bill outside the theatre, and did not go back to their sombre home till the very last moment. The beds were never made, the floors never swept, cups from the last meal remained unwashed on the edge of the table. Juliette left at dawn and was seldom home till late. The two little girls would light a lamp and tidy the house. Then Marie-Thérèse, being the elder, would try to make a soup, but more often they would have to go to bed with nothing more satisfying than a piece of bread, a walnut, and an apple.

When Juliette arrived and found her daughters in bed she also would eat an apple and a nut. This light collation became in her imagination the richest repast. Taking up the only lamp she would retire to her room where her daughters listened to her talking to herself, shuffling about, putting things in secret drawers, and muttering, muttering.

Finally the oil lamp was put out and night fell, dark and silent.

Marie-Thérèse would now begin to toss in her bed, afraid of the unseen things hovering in her imagination. The darkness, the quietness, their mother who would not even hear them if they called, made the night fantastic and terrifying. The nuns, graceful in their robes, entered into her feverish mind, moving slowly towards her. There was no sound but the turning of their rosaries. The stone figures in the candle-lit chapel stepped down from their pedestals, moving like phantoms across the room. The child Jesus with His father, the good St. Joseph, just as Marie-Thérèse dusted them every morning. Then the dog with St. Roch, but the dog was suddenly turned into a wolf, the wolf of the forest of Roussy. Sweat would form on her brow. The saints were all devils and the gentle nuns became witches. Prayers gushed out through hot lips, became alarmingly audible, and ended by frightening her. She would wake Matilda out of a peaceful sleep and pinching her little arms begin:

‘Mater Dolorosa.’

Matilda, the sandman refilling her eyes, repeated, yawning:

‘Ora pro nobis—Turris eburnea—Ora pro nobis,’ she whispered and sank back into sleep.

Marie-Thérèse, furious, pulled her hair, beat her, pinched her.

‘Mater Dolorosa. Go on! Go on!’ she cried.

My mother remembered having seen her father, the zouave, leave the house for ever. He had obtained a bed in an almshouse. He left early just as his daughters were going to school. He wore a scarf and carried his stout stick and made off along the empty road in the direction of the forest. He would have to cross it. There was a tall brick wall with a small door. Through this he would have gone. When in 1908 he died in the hospice for old soldiers, my grandmother was the only person to follow the coffin.

During the daytime when my mother and I were alone in the house we tried to tidy up the big room. Wherever we turned new secrets came dustily to the surface. We discovered the accounts that Juliette kept just after her marriage at the grocer’s shop. There was a dark chest that we forced open, removing yellowed newspapers dated 1889 before coming to a little taffeta dress of the sort of grey which changes colour according to the varying light.



'What an adorable dress!' I cried. 'Just look at the leg-of-mutton sleeves! It reminds me of the *Malheurs de Sophie*!'

'Why, it's my pigeon-breasted dress!' exclaimed my mother.

Alas, the taffeta, on contact with the air, disintegrated. The beauty and colour of the apparition vanished almost as soon as we had spoken. The dress had been known as the princess's dress because all three little girls had worn it—Marguerite first, Marie-Thérèse next, and Matilda whose wearing of it coincided with the last happy days of the grocer's shop before the pony and trap disappeared and the family was obliged to leave the whispering village. My mother was very affected. Unwilling to throw away the remains of the dress, she put it into the fire. The pigeon-breasted taffeta gave a last sparkle and soon there was nothing but a powdery form which broke up, dancing above the embers, as my mother touched it with the poker. The silkworms had become butterflies chasing each other lightly up the chimney.

A few days later we left the rue Pontchartrain.

We crossed the Loire by the long bridge and putting down our parcels in front of the Hôtel d'Angleterre rested a moment out of the hot sun. It was market-day. The milkmaids with their lovely lace caps hurried in every direction. I watched with wondering eyes the battles of the pony chaises, each driver trying to be first to cross the bridge. The centre of the town so full of colour and people, rich merchandise, flowers, vegetables and magnificent fruit, the farmers in their blouses, the wagons full of hay, the shouting, the blowing of horns—all these things were no less wonderful than my mother remembered from her own childhood days. I had mostly heard from her about the rue Denis Papin with its wide stairs leading up steeply to the statue of the great seventeenth-century physicist who had something to do with inventing steam power. Everything that mattered in Blois took place in this street or on these steps. We began to climb them, but instead of going to the top we turned left and found ourselves on cobble-stones between tall, very old, grey houses. There was a fork and we then entered the rue des Violettes.

Here, in the oldest house of all, crazy and picturesque, with its unevenly flagstoned courtyard against the château wall, my mother and I were to lodge.

THE house was very still, and as we did not hear or see anybody we put our parcels at the foot of a steep iron staircase which we climbed as far as the first floor where we knocked.

My mother explained our business to a lovely girl who said she had been sleeping whilst waiting for us to come. As it was midday we were rather surprised that she should sleep so late, surprised to find her with her hair in a long plait hanging down her back, and herself draped in a dressing-gown of faded flannel-ette which in its better days had been sky-blue. She led us into a large room, a little dark, with curtains and arm-chairs of red velvet. I saw my mother look at the antimacassars, which were not of real lace, and her lips tightened and curled downwards as they did when she was critical. At the far end of the room a large bed had red curtains round it. There was a massive round table covered with a thick felt embroidered with differently coloured wool. By the window stood an extremely large fern decorated with a red satin bow and standing in a shiny copper pan.

The young woman spoke to us pleasantly. She told my mother that she could see at once they were going to be friends. She added: 'My name is Berthe. If you like I'll call you Matilda. I expect we are just about the same age in spite of your having such a big girl.' She had looked at me whilst saying these words and now kissed me.

My mother, having removed her wide hat, was holding it on her knees, trying to push the long hatpins through the usual holes in the crown. She must have found this occupation unsatisfactory, for she suddenly rose and with a slight movement of enervation placed her hat on a bust of the Venus of Milo. A gilt clock showed that it was a few minutes past midday. My mother looked at me, glanced back at the clock, and said:

'I think we ought to lunch.'

'So we ought,' agreed Berthe. 'If you run out and buy some bread, a cream cheese, and some fruit, Matilda, I'll lay the table. There's plenty of wine.'

She spoke very gaily. My mother and I hurried down the iron staircase, our steps echoing sonorously, quickly bought our provisions, and on our return found that Berthe had used our short absence to wind her plait hurriedly round her head, lace her corset, and put on a pleated skirt. She had forgotten, however, to do up the back of her lace blouse, and as my mother did it for her Berthe said:

'If you don't mind I'll wait till after lunch to do my hair properly.'

We had an excellent lunch. The two young women then began to exchange confidences and I, restless, unable to bear this atmosphere of red velvet and cream cheese heated by the hot sun, crept out of the room. As a matter of fact my mother had quite forgotten me. At the bottom of the stairs, turning away from the street, I found myself in a narrow, rectangular courtyard into which the sun came obliquely, warming alternately our house and the house next to it. Under the iron stairs was a narrow glass-panelled door leading to my grandmother's lodging. She had chosen this one, the most modest, because of the staircase which filled her with terror and also to be nearer the courtyard where she could put her precious wheelbarrow.

At the far end of the courtyard was an arch which, stretching away deeply, became cavernous and damp. One could follow it for a few yards; one then came up against railings of forged iron surmounted by arrows in the form of fleurs-de-lis. A man in the courtyard said that this iron gate led straight to the secret dungeons of the Château de Blois of which these houses formed the base. He was carrying a package roughly tied with string. It was full of humps which seemed to move and he said to me: 'Come along if you want to see what I've got in my parcel.'

He untied it and took out seven new-born puppies, still blind, which he took one by one, throwing them with all his strength against the wall. They fell like smooth balls at our feet, white with black markings. When he came to the last, he looked at it a moment, appeared to hesitate, and then raised his arm and threw it, like its brothers and sisters, against the wall. I was overwhelmed and, I fear, intensely interested, surprised to see

how these tiny things had passed so rapidly from life to death. The man left their sad little forms lying in the earthy dust of the cave and asked me a lot of questions. I answered him guardedly. Suddenly a little bitch came in sight, her tail wagging anxiously, criss-crossing in the courtyard, seeking the scent of her little ones, and when she reached the mouth of the cavern she gave a pitiful yell and threw herself on one of the lifeless forms which she took up between her teeth, growling and crying. I watched her with a thumping heart. The puppy's head hung loosely from her mouth. Then the man started to pick up his other victims whilst I, nearly out of my mind, noisily ran up the iron staircase, breaking in on my mother and Berthe, tears gushing down my cheeks.

They were just as I had left them, still gossiping, but a huge coffee-pot had arrived on the table, seemingly dominating the situation, and I could see, through my tears, that they had sunk so comfortably into their red velvet arm-chairs that they must both have unlaced their corsets. Berthe's curiously arranged plait crowned her head as before. My mother, looking up, supposed I had fallen down and cut my knee. I tried to explain the horrible scene I had just witnessed, but I was put out by Berthe's presence and furious that my mother should be gossiping so comfortably with a friend. It struck me that as she had so recently left my father she should have kept a more dignified attitude, cried often, and spoken only to me.

Instead of this she gave me two sous to buy a flute of bread and a bar of chocolate. I bought some by the name of Poulain made at a factory in Blois that employed many hundreds of people, and whose gay orange posters covered the walls of the town.

I was walking back from the grocer's nibbling at the chocolate and the bread when I heard the sound of a wooden wheel creaking on the cobbles. Granny was coming home with her wheelbarrow. I rushed at her, stifled her with kisses, and trotted beside her till we came to the glass-panelled door under the iron stairs. We put the wheelbarrow in the courtyard and entered her apartment. I was quite happy again now. Mother could go on gossiping with her new friend. I was no longer alone.

A very large room was the first we came to with barred windows looking out on the narrow rue des Violettes. In front of Granny's bed were all the bundles she had brought from her

other flat. Everything was deliciously untidy. Granny took down an apron which she put round her narrow waist. I wanted one also. She gave me one, knotting it for me at the back. It was lovely to feel it round my legs just as if I had already been a grown-up woman. Alas, examining myself in a mirror I saw that my apron did not join behind but left an expanse of white leg and sock! My deception was great. Granny, who was indulgent, took down a second apron which she fixed up behind me so that the two together formed a dress with a long skirt. They were of different colours, but that did not spoil my make-believe.

We now started to pull the bundles about and open the cases and drawers. I shouted myself hoarse.

'Grand'mère,' cried I, 'here's a set of liqueur glasses!'

'My little Madeleine,' she said, looking round suspiciously, 'it's the set your great-grandfather, the marquis, left me.' She put her finger to her lips and whispered: 'I can't tell you his name because of the family, who would kill me. But patience! Have no fear! The usurpers shall pay, and you, my little Madeleine, shall become a marquise!'

Her flights of fancy changed every day. One had to learn the new ones. It was delicious!

After we had rummaged and upset everything in the room we went up the iron staircase. Berthe and my mother were still gossiping in their arm-chairs but Berthe had done her hair and powdered herself. Her powder was now added to the other smells of the room all baked by the sun. When Granny entered, my mother and Berthe stopped talking; afterwards the conversation restarted fitfully. The two young women shouted trivialities whilst my grandmother stretched her neck trying to hear. She looked on these occasions like a rare bird out of the fables of La Fontaine. When she thought she had understood she shortened her neck in the funniest way, only to shoot it out again a moment later. She laughed, wondered if she had done the right thing, looked angrily puzzled, tried to catch a fresh phrase, and then because she was tired her expression hardened. Imagining that they were muttering unpleasant things about her she fixed first one, then the other, with sullen eyes. At last, cold and dignified, she rose and left the room. I followed her and we went back to our rummaging and fairy-tales. I slept with her that night

and the following night. She seemed to hear and understand me and her deafness did not inconvenience my prattling.

One afternoon after a succession of visits by cattle-dealers in their long blue pinafores, my mother suddenly understood what Berthe had so carefully hidden from her. Berthe and several other women in the house used the red velvet drawing-room to receive farmers and butter merchants coming into town. A regular customer finding my mother alone asked her if she was a new girl in the house. He said he was used to Mlle Berthe and, in principle, did not like changing, but if Mlle Berthe was busy he was willing to try my mother.

Berthe, who had become free, noticing through the half-open door that her regular customer was talking to my mother, did not dare come in. Instead she returned silently into her bedroom, anxiously waiting. The man, puzzled by my mother's lack of enthusiasm, ceased turning his straw hat between his fingers and got up. As he reached the stairs another girl whose room was on the corridor whistled to him. Delighted, he darted into her room whilst the girl broke out, for Berthe's benefit, into a triumphant laugh.

My mother, feeling the need of air, pushed the green plant to one side, and went to sit by the open window. As it was so hot she leaned out. At that moment a man dressed in black and wearing a boater came into the narrow street, looked up, took a golden coin from his waistcoat pocket and placed it in his eye like a monocle so that the sun played on the gold. With his other eye he winked at my mother.

She, thoroughly upset, withdrew into the room which the man took as a sign of acquiescence. Double footsteps now sounded on the iron stairs as the man in the blue blouse, having finished with the girl opposite, going down to the street by the stairs crossed the man with the gold coin who was coming up to my mother.

After this adventure my mother and I chose a little room on the second floor. This part of the house was inhabited by modest employees and my mother decided to start sewing again for a living. She bitterly reproached my grandmother for bringing us to live in such a disreputable place, and my grandmother took this outburst ill. Mother and daughter were no longer on good terms, and again, as in Paris, I was to witness bitter quarrels.

Berthe had got to know a Belgian called Adrien who had something to do with delivering mail to German prisoners. He had fallen desperately in love with Berthe and was anxious they should live like husband and wife. For this reason, being herself fond of him, she used to lock herself up in her room on market-days so as not to have to satisfy the farmers and merchants who came to see her.

One day Berthe announced her intention of giving up her old ways, but she wanted Adrien to marry her in church. She began to make a great fuss of my mother with the intention of purifying herself, so to speak, by contact with a married woman, the mother of a little girl, and a person in every way above suspicion.

Berthe undertook to introduce my mother to many women in need of a good dressmaker. She would even help her to sew. They would turn the room with the red velvet curtains and the tall fern into a sewing-room where the two women would be at home to a very different clientèle. My mother accepted this arrangement, and Berthe told her friends that the most famous dressmaker in Paris had come to live in the house. Customers began to call. Adrien was so delighted that he sent the wives of his superiors to my mother who now had so many orders that she could not deal with them.

Berthe was overjoyed by her new life: for my mother, alas, it was the continuation of her old one. During the day I wandered from the sewing-room to the courtyard, from the courtyard to the mouth of the cavern, fascinated by the iron gate leading to the castle dungeons. I waited impatiently for my grandmother to come home, remaining with her till the following morning. Never have I been so spoilt; it was her opinion that all I said and did were perfect.

Emboldened I played in the street and soon discovered the most picturesque cutler's stall built into the wall of an old leaning house. Though the window was small the scissors and blades made it scintillate; it looked like something out of the *Arabian Nights*. The rays of the sun caught steel and mother-of-pearl, painting them with changing colours. Large scissors for cutting out dresses and coats, murderously pointed knives, sweet little scissors for cutting round lace after embroidering. . . . I spent enchanted moments in front of this window. Soon the cutler's daughter, a Madeleine like myself, took a liking to me and invited

me into her darling shop, giving me permission to put my fingers on the ivory handles of the pocket-knives and sculptured wooden handles of the big knives. There was a dirk or dagger drawn a little way out of its leather sheath. There were also swords unsheathed but which, at night, were placed back in them.

Madeleine Béant was sixteen, large and awkward with a shapeless waist, big hands, big feet, but agreeable features and a warm heart. As happy as a lark she sang all sorts of love-songs, new ones, old ones, with an accent of the Loire, and the Parisian slang in the country girl's mouth seemed quite a different language. She was making her trousseau and we put our heads together about it, but in the morning she helped her mother in the shop, polishing the knives and swords with a huge chamois leather whilst singing: 'Viens poupoule,' counting those which remained in the drawers, and, especially on market-days, making everything shine in the window. Many of the cattle-dealers and farmers in their blue blouses after a visit to the drawing-room with the red velvet chairs and the tall fern, light-hearted and satisfied, had, as they turned from the iron staircase into the narrow street, noticed the cutler's shop; conversely a goodly number of Mme Béant's customers, after buying a good strong pocket-knife, had looked up at Berthe's comely figure and smiling face in the opposite window and decided to spend a few moments in her gentle presence. The two establishments accordingly held each other in mutual esteem. Madeleine Béant had merely kept away from our house because she discreetly felt that her presence might have made Berthe and the other ladies feel uncomfortable.

We used to go to market together, this fabulous market in the garden of France, with its luscious pears, ripe and yellowed by the sun, sold in small boxes, transparent raisins, mountains of butter, pyramids of goat's cheese, set out in front of country women in black with white lace bonnets. When we had time to spare Madeleine and I went as far as the rue Denis Papin, climbing like two silly girls the wide steps leading to the fair-ground. We would come home laden with purchases, pink cheeked.

After lunch we had a different meeting-place.

Where the rue des Violettes forked there was a pretty, curved pavement round a jutting-out house the base of which was occupied by a seed merchant, but as the merchant's entrance was in another street, Mme Béant, the seed merchant's wife, Madeleine



Béant, and I brought out our chairs and sewed on the curved pavement from where we could see everything that was happening in both streets. We cut out our petticoats and embroidered them, or hemmed the napkins and sheets for Madeleine Béant's trousseau. We sang love-songs; when a passer-by came towards our raised platform we would gradually stop singing out of curiosity to inspect him. One day we heard people shouting and running. A German prisoner had escaped from the castle and was being chased by a crowd of children and shouting men. He passed us, miserably red in the face, his hair shorn, his thick neck pearly with sweat. He held a tiny attaché case in his immense hand. He was caught and led back by those who had pursued him. We could see his face this time: tears fell from his blue eyes, wetting his cheeks. He still held tightly to his attaché case. The whole thing had passed so quickly that I still held my petticoat in the air, my needle poised above the embroidery.

There lived in the house opposite the seed merchant's a little boy called George whom I first saw looking intently at us through an upstairs window. He smiled, and Madeleine Béant who knew him both vexed me and made me blush with pleasure by saying that his gracious little ways were all put on for me. We met him one morning in the market held in the Place Louis XII. He followed us and Madeleine Béant asked him to come to us while we sewed during the afternoon.

George's parents were deaf and dumb. They only spoke to each other by signs and George knew their language perfectly; sometimes forgetting, he would address us in this way. He was a pitiful little object, suffering from weak eyes and an excessive timidity. Few people called him George; they referred to him as the deaf and dumb couple's boy, and this increased his misery. My young heart was full of sympathy. I took him under my wing and often left my lingerie on my chair to play with him in the courtyard.

Granny had some tenants, M. and Mme Garnier and their daughter Fernande, who lived in a large room facing the rue des Violettes with a door into the street. It was probably converted from a shop. These people owned a large covered barrow which they kept near the rabbit hutches and George and I liked to play round it.

M. Garnier was the least interested in the barrow. He mostly went out to work at the chocolate place or at a factory where they made heavy boots for soldiers. He was taciturn and elusive. Mme Garnier was dark, fine-looking and powerful, in the thirties. She dominated: when one saw her behind her barrow all done up in red with the jewellery, the rings, and the brooches sparkling on sawdust, at these times Mme Garnier had the authority and poise of a Roman empress. She would place in advantageous positions the minute little boxes in which the finest pieces of her collection reposed on cotton wool. There were gold brooches with the names of the various saints—Sainte Marie, Sainte Jeanne; pious effigies and metal hearts that opened out and in which one placed a wisp of one's lover's hair, charms made like four-leaved clover, others with the figure 13, and horns of plenty.

Fernande Garnier was so small and slight for her fifteen years that she seemed to have nothing in common with her mother. The barrow was really hers. She pushed it to market and brought it home, and by long association with it she had come to resemble it, her poor thin arms sticking out like shafts. At dawn she was up making the coffee, cutting sandwiches for the man's lunch, whilst the empress continued to sleep in a vast bed with red curtains at the far end of their one-roomed apartment. Three of these beds elbowed up against one another for space. The members of the family retired to their closed-in beds like Mme de Maintenon withdrew to her apartments. Once behind their red curtains they saw nothing, heard nothing, dressed, undressed, and when they opened their curtains you might be certain they would be all ready to go out of doors.

Fernande, having served breakfast, swept the floor, and collecting the chamber-pots under each canopied bed, emptied the contents into the gutter whose foetid water flowed unhygienically down the picturesque rue des Violettes. She then took the wash-basins with their soapy water and emptied those also at the street door. A moment later you would see her leave with a tall pitcher to draw clear water at the pump. She was always so busy I think she often forgot to drink the bowl of coffee getting cold on the edge of the table. Soon she would be in the courtyard, uncovering the heavy barrow, harnessing herself to it, drawing its iron-rimmed wheels over the uneven cobbles, clattering out into the rue des

Violettes, then down the rue du Commerce on her way to the fairground above the statue of Denis Papin, or perhaps bound for the bridge across the Loire, to set up her barrow in some distant village.

A few hours later Mme Garnier, cool, rested, magnificent, would emerge from between her bed curtains and pass along the rue des Violettes on the way to join her daughter. If the market were at Blois, and we went there, we would see her enthroned beside the yawning Fernande. She had a knowledge of magic, so people said, and could sell one a locket that was certain to make a man amorous if only one could steal a bristling hair from his moustache and imprison it in the charm. Then somebody would arrive, whisper a few words in her ear, and wait. Mme Garnier, leaving her august throne to Fernande, would follow the stranger. Fernande, now in charge of the stall, huddled herself up on her mother's chair and soon fell fast asleep. Sometimes Mme Garnier, on her return, woke her daughter with a tremendous smack, but often Fernande was amicably warned by a neighbour of her mother's coming.

Madeleine Béant and I used to love going to see Fernande at market. Mme Garnier, though hard on her daughter, was always glad to see us. Then there was a morning in the week when neither Fernande nor her mother sold trinkets. They remained at home, Mme Garnier in the privacy of her bed, Fernande airing the mattresses of the other two beds in front of the open window. The mattresses, being large, choked up the window, keeping out the light. Fernande accordingly opened the street door, and taking up her broom swept away the dust in eddies which met similar eddies emerging from the house opposite where Madeleine Béant was sweeping out the cutler's shop. At this moment, having nothing to do, I would rush out into the middle of the road, stopping at an equal distance between the two brooms, and soon I would have both young women in cascades of happy laughter.

A quarter of an hour later, like three frolicking children, we set off for the local market. The joy Fernande experienced to go to market with a basket under her arm instead of professionally behind a heavy barrow was quite delirious. She bought her lunch on these occasions, a steak and potatoes to fry, for she must have it piping hot to make up for the cold collations, the fruit,

the cheese, and the bread, eaten quickly all the rest of the week in the open air behind the ambulating jewellery shop.

She adored her mother and served her with a face garlanded with love. Nothing her mother wanted was tiring or difficult, and if Mme Garnier smiled at her, calling her 'my little goat,' then Fernande's expression was beatific.

One afternoon she came to join our sewing class outside the seed merchant's shop. She had started a petticoat which was taking so long to finish that the silk was shiny by contact with her rough, benumbed fingers more accustomed to handling the polished shafts of her barrow. The needle kept on dropping from the slippery folds of her creased lingerie. The scissors rolled off her lap. Her thimble became unstuck and danced lightly over the paving-stones. We laughed joyously as she kept on stooping to pick something up. Her mind was not on what she was supposed to be making. Her eyes darted in the direction of her house and every now and then a man or a woman, walking or driving a pony trap, would stop at the door and be swiftly let in.

We did not wonder overmuch about all these comings and goings. The rue des Violettes had many a secret. One felt that it had grown wise and tolerant with centuries and that we probably elbowed the ghosts of Catherine de Médicis and Nostradamus.

I had not been long in this street before I discovered nearly opposite our house a long, dark tunnel which led to a transversal street. The taking of it saved those of us who were in the secret several minutes' walk when going to another part of the town, and though I was at first terrified by its darkness, its echoes, and the fear of being chased by rats, I learnt to keep my eyes firmly fixed on the distant circle of light and walk bravely through.

We had been sewing all the afternoon when Fernande, looking up, saw her mother leave the house and take this passage. Mme Garnier's eyes, plunged too quickly into darkness, did not distinguish, straight across her path, an open trap leading into a deep cellar. She fell through it and remained for a time unconscious.

Fernande went on embroidering, but as it was late George returned home, his mother having made signs that the soup was ready, and Madeleine Béant slowly folded her smartest petticoat. My mother sent me a message to go to the baker. Fernande stayed on, apparently, another half-hour and then went home to

prepare supper. When her father arrived but her mother still did not come back Fernande, suddenly anxious, hurried across the road, ran into the tunnel, and half-way through saw the open trap. Kneeling down she heard her mother, who had just recovered consciousness, groaning, and, terrified, went to fetch her father. They managed to let themselves down into the cellar, but it was not till the fire brigade arrived that Mme Garnier could be brought up and safely laid on her four-poster bed.

When the street had become reasonably quiet again, the firemen gone, and the crowd scattered, Mme Garnier told her family that she had broken her leg, that it was a simple fracture, and that whatever happened nobody must fetch a doctor. She asked her husband to give her a glass of rum and sent Fernande to fetch my grandmother. Granny undressed her and then Granny and Fernande, guided by Mme Garnier grimly clutching the bed-posts, tugged and pushed the broken leg. The husband, who was also pulling under his wife's direction, fainted, rolling gently on the floor. Granny and Fernande, and I looking on, continued to do just what Mme Garnier told them. Suddenly she let go of the bed-posts and as she sank down into the bed the broken ends of bone fitted into each other.

Mme Garnier then massaged herself, helped Granny to wind a bed sheet round the leg, and quietly went to sleep. We simply could not believe what we had seen. The husband was brought back to life with a jug of cold water and Granny and I went back full of wonder.

The next morning Fernande went off with her barrow as if nothing had happened. For a week she attended all the usual markets after which she stayed at home and nursed her mother with touching devotion. Soon crowds of people knocked at her door. Some went in limping and came out cured. She was the most celebrated bone-setter on the whole of the Loire. She had effected the most extraordinary cures in addition to which she was gifted with second sight. Naturally the doctors waged on her an unending war. Her ambulating stall was merely a blind. She got better very quickly. We used to go to see her in bed and she told us our fortune; mine was so unlikely that my mother would never believe in it. She told my mother that she would soon be a widow. She said we would both go to England and that eventually I should become famous. When I laughed, she said:

'Laugh, little girl: it isn't with you that I shall begin making mistakes. Your destiny is as clear to me as black coffee is black.' She told Berthe she would marry the man she wanted to marry and that she would have two children. Berthe was delighted. She was not a person to doubt good news.

As soon as she was able to get about again Mme Garnier went to lodge in another part of the town. She doubtless felt that her many visitors had created too much attention. The barrow remained in our courtyard and we continued from time to time to see Fernande.

My mother received a letter from Marguerite Rosier who told her that my father was so miserable that everybody was sorry for him. He had found out where we were and wanted us to come back. Soon he began to write himself and my mother read his letters to Berthe. Then Berthe left us. She was going to marry her Belgian.

Besides looking after the house in which we lodged my grandmother was the keeper of a garden which was a veritable paradise. A lovely road of yellow earth led to it beside a high wall at the end of which was an ogival door, thick, sculptured with medieval designs, and barded with decorative ironwork. When we stopped in front of this door we were overcome, Granny and I, by the silence we had made for ourselves, for all along the road the wheelbarrow had creaked and now its noisy wheel was stilled at our feet. Impressed and a little frightened, Granny would lift up her black apron and fetch out a key from a pocket in her underskirts. My heart beat at the sight of this, so eager was I to penetrate into the garden, but Granny would first stoop down and, nodding her old head, examine with great suspicion the state of the lock to see if anybody had tampered with it since her last coming. Then making some incomprehensible remark she would insert the key into the hole and try to turn it with both hands. The rusty lock resisted, a spider came running out, and just as I was certain that we were going to be kept out for ever the lock turned, the door opened scratchily against the gravel, just a few inches before sticking, and a great wave of sweet smells rushed into our nostrils.

We pushed against the door with all our might. Since the previous week the herbs, the flowers, and the weeds had sprung

up in the path and made a luxuriant barrier. We now went back to fetch the wheelbarrow. All round us the bees and insects buzzed and sang in the hot, dry air. Purple irises, tall, thick, and beautiful, reaching to the level of my eyes, headily scented arum lilies, red currant bushes from which hung strings of rubies, peaches resting their velvet cheeks against the hot wall, greeted me, causing me to run from one to the other. At every new discovery I would call Granny and she, hurrying up, would screw up her face, purse her lips, and exclaim 'Heu!' as if she were just as surprised as I. Indeed, that is why Granny and I got on so well together. She was always expressing the most candid surprise. The magnificent strawberries and peaches, red currants, and greengages all about us seemingly filled her with perplexity as if she were trying to decide how to turn them all into jam. She said: 'We would need a magic cauldron for all this. I have an idea. Let's first have something to eat.'

A small tool-house stood against the garden wall. The window panes were broken, and inside the table and chairs were covered with spiders' webs; but we had it clean in no time and my grandmother, plunging her wrinkled hands into a black basket which she carried about with her on all important occasions (she had brought it to Paris when she came to see us), brought out a beautiful white napkin, smelling of soapy wash being dried in the sun, and laying it on the table placed on it a long French bread, into which she stuck her pointed knife, a goat's cheese, and a bottle of black coffee.

I was longing for the bread: Granny was thinking about the coffee. Like a witch in a fairy-story she was soon gathering dry sticks to make a fire, and now I understood why there were always so many saucepans in her wheelbarrow. When the coffee was hot she brought it into the summer-house. Then she took the bread, removed the knife from it, and holding the golden crust against her black dress made the sign of the cross upon it. She cut several large slices. Then it was the turn of the goat's cheese, hard and blue. I was deliriously happy, but soon, finding that I was tired of sitting down, I took a final slice of bread and ran out into the garden where I picked some greengages and strawberries for dessert.

I hid in the hollow of a tree and soon I heard Granny calling me. She passed by without discovering my hiding-place; then I ran

behind her, catching hold of her apron strings. She laughed, called me a little she-devil, and by flattery and vague promises to tell me stories and to show me 'certain objects which she possessed but that nobody had yet seen,' she brought me in front of the large basket we were to fill with gooseberries to make a jelly.

At four o'clock we had to leave this paradise. The wheelbarrow was full of fruit and dry wood. Its wooden wheel sang over the yellow road. The black basket was strung round me and was so large I could hardly see where I was going, but I never felt under my feet the cobbles of the bridge across the Loire. I moved ethereally, my mouth daubed in the juice of sun-ripened fruit.

The rue des Violettes seemed narrow and dark after this day amongst the butterflies and bees, but though I was tired I determined immediately to go in search of George to tell him everything we had done. As soon as I discovered him I gave him a handful of greengages picked in the enchanted garden. 'Take me one day,' he implored, but firmly I answered: 'Only if you first let me see where you live. I want to go inside it.' Then he looked down at his shoes and said nothing. Nobody in the street had ever been to call on the unfortunate deaf and dumb parents. When did the mother sweep out the room? How did she cook? These were questions that we were for ever discussing. I was just dying to go and see, but nothing could tempt George. Was he obeying his parents' orders or was he ashamed of them? I do not know. During my absence he had cut out with his clever hands a tiny cupboard to put my doll's clothes in, and seeing this treasure I forgave him for being so stubborn about not showing me his home. I even invited him to come and see Granny making her jelly the next day.

While waiting for the evening meal I used to establish myself on the two bottom steps of the iron staircase. It was the hour of the day when, feeling maternal, I rocked or undressed my doll Bambino. Our stay at Blois had not improved his looks. Too frequently washed he had lost the blueness of his eyes and most of his hair which had been inadequately stuck on with glue. My doll, therefore, was bald. His cheeks were pale and because his eyes had no more colour he looked blind. After each new infirmity he became dearer to me, and I saw to it that his clothes



became increasingly elegant to compensate for the fast disappearance of his physical charms. His intelligence was beyond discussion. George who at first had thought him horrible now claimed that he was magnificent. Secretly George and I were husband and wife and Bambino was our child.

On this particular evening my mother had gone across to see Berthe. My mother and Granny were keeping away from each other and just now were hardly on speaking terms, with the result that my mother was making all the more fuss of Berthe whose lodging was in the house above the tunnel where Mme Garnier had had her accident. Granny was preparing supper. I thought it would be fun to go to the top of the iron staircase and see how fast I could run down. Putting this project into immediate execution I missed my foothold and rolled down to the bottom of the flight where, like a turtle on my back, I shouted with all my force.

I was picked up by a ravishing figure, lips as fresh and red as raspberries, a perfume which went to my head deliciously. The curiosity of examining further this new face put a stop to my tears. The lady helped me up, placed Bambino gently in my arms, and asked me where my mother was.

'With Berthe,' I answered.

At this she showed her gums, as pink and strong as those of a young wolf ready to bite, and asked again:

'And that old witch of a grandmother, where 's she?'

'Underneath.'

'Then, come. I'll take you to her.'

She opened the door. Granny, seeing the bump on my forehead and my bleeding nose, immediately concluded that somebody had tried to kidnap and murder me, and, gesticulating like a windmill, warmly thanked the young woman, who exclaimed:

'Well, if you ask my opinion it 's a real pity to see a little girl like that with nobody to look after her. Her mother won't speak to me because I'm not an honest woman, and there she goes spending her afternoon with Berthe who was no better than me till she hitched up with her Belgian. There 's no reason for this little girl's mother and Berthe to put on airs. Anybody would think they were princesses!'

She turned to go up the iron staircase.

I ran after her because she had promised me some cotton wool

for my nose. We went into her flat which smelt deliciously of make-up and perfume.

I looked round full of wonderment, a sombre little room with postcards of aviators pinned to the wall, a photograph of the King of the Belgians, bowls of imitation crystal like the ones you can win at fun fairs, and oh, most beautiful of all, a pink bedspread with tulips of all colours! She went to a small table with a marble top, pulled a tiny piece of cotton wool from a roll, and dipping it in her wash-basin jug handed it to me.

While I washed my wound she pushed the bidet under her commode with her foot, tidied up a little, and then smiled at me, glad to have enticed me into her room and anxious to keep me a few moments by any subterfuge.

She showed me the postcards on her mantelpiece thus:

'That is the King of the Belgians, a jolly fellow, and here 's the Prince of Wales, not a bad sort at all! Oh, it isn't that I know them personally but there are things that one gets to hear about. Nobody can hide what they 've done. Remember that. Some try, but it all comes out in the end. Take Berthe, for instance, she may *think* I don't know about her, but I do. We all know about her. Even if she went to the other side of America, and that 's far enough, isn't it, well, they would find out. There 's no point in a woman putting on airs because, for the moment, one man happens to be paying her as much as it took several to pay her before.'

She went to the door and listened, danced about her room like a butterfly, opened and closed a drawer, asked me suddenly what I thought, broke into a pretty rage, showed her lovely teeth, and then smiled angelically. She took off her jacket, tapped her hair to bring back the waves, powdered her face with a swan's-down puff, passed the rouge unnecessarily over her painted lips. 'As a matter of fact, I was just going out into the street. You understand?'

'Of course I understand,' I answered innocently. 'It 's funny you only going out at night. Do you work at the chocolate place?'

She threw back her pretty head and laughed so much that tears fell down her freshly made-up cheeks, making warm rivulets across the powder.

'How old are you?'

'I shall be ten on the 13th.'

'Ah! You were born on a 13th! You'll be lucky, lucky all the way, lucky with men, lucky in everything. It's written all over your face. I was born on a 31st. To get my luck I have to reverse the figures—13th, do you see?'

She showed me a brooch with a 13. It had a long chain with a silver watch at the other end and was attached by a safety-pin to the belt of her skirt.

'I have a little luck from time to time,' she said, smiling prettily, 'as much as I can expect, having cheated on the date!'

She was making good the damage on her cheeks from laughing, and looking at me coyly in the mirror asked:

'Frankly, do you think I'm pretty?'

'Oh, very! Very!' I shouted enthusiastically.

She kissed me.

'Your mother is pretty in a sort of way but she never smiles. In our profession one needs to smile all the time.'

Suddenly we heard steps on the iron staircase and looking out we saw my mother's flaming hair. Then my new friend pushed me roughly out of her room, crying out to my mother:

'Here, you silly bitch, take a look at your daughter. I had to pick her up and look after her while you were gossiping with that tart of a Berthe!'

My mother remained gaping at this unexpected sally whilst the door was slammed behind me, the same door through which the man in the blue blouse had been enticed when Berthe was afraid to meet him in the *salon* with the red velvet chairs. My mother sniffed as I came near her, smelt the woman's perfume, and angrily passed a damp towel over my face as much to remove all trace of bad companionship as to clean the blood from my nose. Her frigid disapproval saved me from being smacked for playing on the iron staircase. We went to supper. Granny was laying the table and had quite forgotten what she had witnessed of the incident.

The next morning my mother kept me by her; she had hired a sewing-machine and spent most of her time with Berthe, but as this was Adrien the Belgian's day off he insisted on taking us all to visit the castle of Blois. Berthe wore her check coat and skirt with a shiny leather belt; my mother's costume was black, but both had been made by themselves, and Berthe was terribly proud to show her lover what she had learnt to do.

We climbed a lot of stone stairs and joined a group of sightseers who were being taken round by a guide. The guide recognized Adrien who must have been quartered in the château, I think, and he hailed us with familiarity and importance. We saw where the Duc de Guise was assassinated by Henry III; we were even shown the blood. I was enchanted but terribly eager to get home to Granny who would be making the gooseberry jelly at any moment. The duke's blood and the jelly got so mixed up in my mind that I made a thorough nuisance of myself. It was decided to take me home. My mother would spend the evening with Berthe and Adrien.

I arrived home out of breath and very red in the face and found George and Granny, each gripping the end of a napkin, squeezing the juice of the gooseberries. The copper pan was there, shining like a hot sun, and mountains of castor sugar, and the scales with their various-sized copper weights in wooden sheaths, a treasure saved from the grocery shop at Selles. I was put out to think that Granny had dared to start without me. The clean pots stood in a line like little soldiers, and I was set to work cutting out circles of transparent paper which had to soak in a saucer of rum. I quickly noticed that Granny was not her talkative, happy self, and I recalled hearing my mother tell Adrien and Berthe, during our visit to the castle, that we would soon be returning to Paris. Granny was delighted to see the back of her daughter but broken-hearted to lose me. She was a real mother hen when her children were small, but as soon as the chicks grew into hens themselves she lost all interest. When the jelly began to boil Granny put twenty pots on one side. She wrote with a shaking hand on the sides: 'August 1916.' These were the ones we were to take away.

As it was still quite early Granny took her wheelbarrow full of linen as far as the washing boat in the middle of the Loire. Having nodded to the other washerwomen she knelt at her usual place, the water running lazily under the planks, the smell of disinfectant mingling coolly and pleasantly with the mire and grasses of the shallow river. On our way back to the town we picked roses through the fences of pretty villas, and these small thefts delighted me. Granny put her wheelbarrow in a friend's yard and took us to the finest pastry-cook's in Blois, ordering expensive cakes with the most noble air. The waitress looking

at Granny's shabby clothes, still damp round the sleeves from washing in the Loire, hesitated to part with such very expensive merchandise, whereupon Granny, delicately lifting up her apron, pulled out a fifty-franc note from her underskirt. She gave the impression of unhurriedly preparing to pay; in reality she had guessed what was in the waitress's mind. At the sight of so much money the girl became all smiles, but Granny became haughtier than a marquise, looking down at her with withering disdain.

On our return home I saw Granny putting the twenty pots of gooseberry jelly in a basket with straw: then she sat down and wept. I came up behind her and kissed her. She gave me a golden coin of twenty francs, some blue liqueur glasses, and a saucepan of blood-red enamel which I had always admired in her kitchen. This saucepan gave me such intense joy that I became quite happy to leave my grandmother. I ran to our own room where I found my mother kneeling on the floor packing. I had no longer any doubt. We were leaving. My mother looked at me sideways and said: 'Well, here's my little girl!' I burst out crying. I was eternally between mother and daughter, father and mother.

Granny cried herself to sleep, then, as soon as it was light, came to kiss me and went off. A few moments later I heard her wheelbarrow dancing over the cobble-stones.

# I 3

**A**S soon as we arrived at the Quay D'Orsay I saw my father eagerly looking out for us. In the first moment of recognition, from a distance, I noticed with surprise more than with pain how much older he had become, but as I ran to him he lifted me off my feet and kissed me so tenderly that a wonderful warmth flowed over my body. He put me down and looking at my mother said in a low, loving voice:

'I was *so* afraid you would not come!'

They walked in front of me to the barrier. I was carrying a small wicker basket with Bambino, the liqueur glasses, and the chest of drawers which George had made me to put Bambino's trousseau in. Suddenly, thinking of George, I imagined that, like mother, I had left home, left George my husband, taking our child away, leaving a curt note on the kitchen table. I therefore composed my features to the severe and sharp expression of a woman who had recently taken an important decision.

This occupation with variants lasted till we reached the fortifications at Clichy. The grass along the wall had grown tall and hard, yellowed by the heat of a nearly finished summer; forgotten smells greeted me, the flowers in pots from the nearby cemetery, the distant river smell of the Seine, and the dusty putrefaction of the streets.

My father explained that he had taken a new flat, his peace-offering to my mother. Clearly he was very anxious to know whether she would approve of it and there was a touching desire in his explanations to see her smile and say 'Thank you' which she pretended not to notice, keeping her thin lips closed, reserving anything she had to say till she was aware of as yet unknown but suspected difficulties.

Marguerite Rosier and her daughter Lucienne were waiting to show us round by which it was clear that they had helped my father choose our new home. The flat was on the ground floor with hardly any light, two hours of sunshine every day at the most,

but it had what our neighbours in those times called *le confort moderne*, which meant gas, a tap with running water over the sink, and a w.c. of our own!

My father, before coming to the station, had put a stew to simmer on the range, and as he was very good at putting in the right herbs the apartment smelt already lived in. Moreover, he had laid the table in the kitchen; there was a new American oil-cloth with red and white squares that I thought magnificent. My mother noticed it also and my father, who was watching her every movement, said quickly: 'I couldn't stand the other any longer. You remember, it was on it that you left the note?' My mother answered dryly: 'There was no reason to throw it away. It would have come in useful.' Her answer made me wince and I saw my father look down discomfited.

We went to the Rosiers' for coffee. I was delighted to be back with Lucienne. Hyacinthe, terribly busy at the bank, puffing with importance, made a few judicious remarks about the High Command, and then suddenly gave us his views on why gas was becoming so bad for cooking and lighting. Like most shy men he allowed himself to become heated in an argument, hoping to be judged by his intelligence. I think he really must have been very clever and Marguerite was lucky to have a husband who was almost bound to push his way to some degree of success, but though we admired him in the abstract his learned arguments made us yawn or laugh. He repeated a great number of times:

'Containers, containers, that's what we need. We need containers and more containers!'

Marguerite made joyous signs behind his back as if to say: 'You see! He's just the same!' Then said to her husband: 'Come, Hyacinthe, hand me over your container and I'll pour you out some more coffee!'

Hyacinthe who, in the full fever of his speech, was stumping up and down the room, looked at his wife frowningly and asked: 'What do you mean? A container for coffee?'

He brushed a wisp of hair back from his forehead and went on angrier:

'You're mad! You're not capable of understanding anything. Can't you see that a container for gas is a huge affair?'

He suddenly remained open-mouthed in front of the hilarious tears of his wife. She was laughing at him! Making a fool of

him! He looked round savagely to see on whose side we were. Then furiously he limped out of the room and down the stairs to count the provisions in the cellar. Unwisely he had left a bottle of rum on the table which Marguerite and my father and mother cruelly emptied.

My father was helping to make a new airfield just outside Paris. They were being built everywhere and labour was short so that he could be reasonably certain of work. His courage was still immense; he would do so much overtime that he occasionally remained away half the night.

A few days after our return my mother and I who now went to the Lorraine market, being the nearest to our new home, met Germaine Séguin perched on very high heels. She invited us to come to their flat which we did the same afternoon, bringing Marguerite Rosier with us. M. Séguin, even more short-sighted than we had last seen him, had just inherited twenty thousand francs from a distant uncle. This sum was so considerable for a family who had never come to the end of the week without having to ask for credit that M. Séguin had immediately resigned from his job of beating carpets for the Magasin du Printemps, and there remained nothing to remind him of his past but a pair of rose-coloured carpet slippers. Mme Séguin and Germaine, taking their cue from the man of the family, immediately left the factory where they worked, and for a full month, newly clothed, they paraded the avenue and went to the theatre every night. At the end of this period, fearing to be penniless again, they invested their remaining money in buying knitting-machines, preferring to stay at home making knitted goods, which were then rapidly coming into fashion, than to go back to factory life. Each had a machine. The kitchen table was covered with apparatus over which hung a smell of warm wool, machine oil, and M. Séguin's pipe tobacco. Germaine went to fetch the wool and delivered the work when it was finished. Mme Séguin was looking for a little girl to help her wind the wool on the bobbins. My mother offered to loan me to them for a few hours in the afternoon, at any rate till the end of the summer holidays.

At first the different coloured wools delighted me, but I have never been any good at doing the same thing for more than a few minutes. Happily Germaine took me with her to deliver the finished garments. We would hurry to get rid of the parcel



and then walk slowly up and down the Boulevard Victor-Hugo, an avenue of ill repute. Germaine would stop, roll her hips, and show off her high heels in front of the apprentice apaches who, hidden just inside dark doorways, were learning the business whilst waiting for the call-up. I became somewhat frightened of these faces, so good-looking but false, youths with sticky dark hair who whistled like nightingales without moving their lips, or who played such pretty love-songs on the mouth-organ that stones would have wept. I was afraid, I know not of what. I would press Germaine's arm and whisper for her to come away. She would scold me. Then I would say: 'Come, Germaine, or I shall go home by myself and tell your mother where you are!' Suddenly she would straighten her hips and run after me on her high heels. The fear of getting into trouble before she was twenty-one checked her natural aspirations. Occasionally after long wanderings we would return after dark, holding each other tightly by the arm, Germaine sniffing the night air, dreaming of love-songs, idleness, and the excitement of being a prostitute.

My mother had started to sew again. She could never leave it. She used to say that she was tied to it as the galley-slaves were chained to the heavy iron ball. We met Mme Gaillard who now centred her attention on table linen, deploring machine-made lace and all this knitting that was becoming increasingly in the fashion. Only a few old-fashioned ladies wore lace jabots and fronts which Mme Gaillard would send to their country homes. Then, too, crape was increasing its ugly head. The mourning departments of the big stores were the busiest—in the streets the crowds, though made picturesque by men's uniforms, were streaked with black.

Marie-Thérèse and Rolande were still in their apartment, rue de Longchamps. My aunt could not stand being left so long without her husband and her character was showing bitterness and revolt. He was not in danger but she was afraid he would be sent to the front. Fear kept her awake at night. She thought of her husband incessantly, working very hard so that when the war was over he would find a little money at home. She and Rolande went without what was necessary for their health. I went to stay with them for a while; in the evenings we used to call on my aunt's customers, parlourmaids for the most part, or ladies' maids for whom she made the prettiest hats. A sister of

Raoul, the footman, a girl called Louise, had managed to keep an excellent situation as cook. She was lovely and had what modistes call *une tête à chapeaux*: a person on whom any hat looks its best, a quality that has nothing to do with beauty as such. Hats fit some heads magically. There is no explaining these things. They depend on line or colour which the eye does not always perceive in advance. At all events the ugliest hat in the world would have looked pretty on Louise's head. This girl served her mistress with the utmost devotion. In the evening she would bid her good night and then, running up to her sixth-floor attic, would dress with extraordinary taste and elegance, put her gloves on, and, of course, one of my aunt's hats, and then run off to Magic City or Luna Park where she would roller-skate or dance with officers, French or allied, till dawn. She would then sleep for two hours, step softly into her employer's room, draw the curtains, serve her breakfast in bed, looking as fresh and happy as somebody who had slept the whole night through.

In the evening she would make the most succulent dishes for her young mistress whose husband was at the front, putting all her heart into the cooking of them out of genuine affection and sympathy. When the meal had gone up to the dining-room, she would receive my aunt who would bring her a new hat or one of her old ones made to look different with a fresh ribbon. These fittings would take place in the clean, bright kitchen with Rolande and me shyly standing in a corner. Afterwards, when supper was brought down again and there was part of what Louise had so lovingly made left over, she would quickly bundle a peach or an ice into a paper bag and give it to us. To my aunt who always carried about a large bag of American oilcloth she would give a few pieces of coal. Then, sweetly, she would shoo us off the premises, go to put her young mistress to bed, flying off to her night's pleasure, figures of eight and dreamy waltzes on the roller-skating floor, or languid tangos with good-looking foreigners. Charming Louise! How adorable you could look in those hats, one I remember, in particular, with a bunch of forget-me-nots next to your young cheek!

We ran down the service stairs and out into the streets where the lamps were shaded. My aunt, since the departure of her husband, wore the strangest clothes—some of his tweeds, for instance, curiously re-cut and adapted to her use. With these

rather mannish costumes she put on a black taffeta hat made out of a piece of material left over from a customer, and so narrow in the brim that it looked like a bowler hat sat upon and squashed: however, it had in the front a rectangular buckle in mother-of-pearl which, in conjunction with the tweeds, gave my aunt a curious resemblance to an eighteenth-century postilion. This unusual costume caused amusement in the rue de Longchamps, but my aunt was so proud that the suits her husband wore, given to him by the baron his master, emanated from Savile Row, that whenever any of her friends passed a remark she took on a knowing and superior air and said: 'The material is English.'

Thus dressed, my aunt, carrying with both hands the shiny bag with the coal in it, Rolande and I trotting beside her, was preparing to cross the road when, her view partly obstructed by the bag, her legs curved by the tallness of her Louis XV heels, tripped over the edge of the pavement and fell on her knees in the gutter, in which ludicrous position she remained with her arms folded over the bag, her heels caught up on the edge of the pavement. Rolande and I regarded her with the utmost surprise. The moon cast a glow on the mother-of-pearl buckle on the front of her hat and made it appear phosphorescent. Rolande started cruelly to laugh. Marie-Thérèse called us furiously to order and obediently we began to lift her up, helped by a passing gendarme. The presence of the policeman, smiling, had covered her cheeks with pink confusion. We walked silently and more carefully home.

The next day when we went to call on Louise, the doorkeeper told us that her latest nocturnal adventure had ended in hospital where she now lay on the danger list. Her young mistress, accustomed to be wakened by Louise every morning, had slept till midday; then fearing an accident had run up to the room on the sixth floor where she found that Louise's bed had not been slept in. She had sent to the doorkeeper's lodge for news. Towards lunch time a police sergeant came to report that a young woman of her name, having fractured her thigh while skating at the Palace of Ice, had been taken unconscious to hospital where pleurisy had set in.

Louise's young mistress had hurried to her pretty maid's bedside, but three days later Louise died.

My aunt took me back to Clichy where this appalling tragedy

was much talked about. During my stay at the rue de Long-champs Marie-Thérèse had taken me to the hairdresser who cut my hair short. My father was not at all pleased, disliking any change of feminine fashion, and whether on account of this or simply on old scores he became increasingly disagreeable to Marie-Thérèse whom he accused of having a thoroughly bad influence over my mother, making her believe that her lot was worse than it really was and exciting her to revolt. After lunch on Sundays he would not stay with us at home, and to escape what he called our 'insipid feminine talk' would go to play cards at his favourite café. He would come home late and joyful, but his gaiety would be quick to turn at the least provocation to violence, and then, in spite of his tenderness at the Quay D'Orsay station and his many solemn promises, the angry scenes would start all over again just as in the old days. Marguerite Rosier, wise in her manner and of excellent counsel, advised my mother not to see Marie-Thérèse any more; this my mother agreed to. Our visits became fewer and soon we broke off relations altogether.

Marie-Thérèse, perhaps out of revenge but also from curiosity, started to write to their sister Marguerite who had married an Armenian and now lived in a London suburb. Marguerite, you will recall, was the eldest of the three sisters who at the age of twelve had been apprenticed to a dressmaker at Vierzon. Anxious for news of Granny and what was happening at Blois, Marguerite, informed of our visit by Marie-Thérèse, sent dolls to Rolande and to me, and asked my mother to write to her; but here again my father intervened. Though he had a soft spot for his own sister he wanted to estrange my mother entirely from hers.

When my Aunt Marguerite continued to send me presents, my father could not well prevent me from writing to say thank you. We therefore started a correspondence which later was to have important results. Her husband, a good deal older than she was, was in the Levantine trade. The fact that we knew practically nothing of her married life was typical of my mother's family, who were always not seeing one another for long periods at a time. We now learnt that Aunt Marguerite and her husband owned a little house at Beckenham, Kent. Obviously the eldest sister had become the most successful of the three, and from now on we spoke of her as 'the aunt from England.'

On 1st October I went back to the Protestant school which I

had left a year earlier, before going to St. Cloud, and I was automatically placed with the older girls in Mlle Zélie's class. Mlle Zélie was delightful, but I made no scholastic progress, having been outdistanced during my year of idleness and being unable to catch up in a class where there were so many pupils. We spent too much time also, I expect, singing hymns and reading the New Testament, though both these occupations delighted me.

Meanwhile we again changed our apartment, leaving the ground-floor flat, which was really too dark, for one on the first floor on the opposite side of the street from which my mother, hidden behind a muslin curtain, could see everything taking place in the busy avenue. This amusement partly restored her composure. So many things happened: a horse that stumbled, bringing to the scene of the accident waves of women and urchins, or possibly an ambulance clanging along to the Gouin Hospital, or, most interesting of all, a funeral. The war was becoming interminable. Men were going away every day, and though my father limped and only had one eye he was placed in a labour corps to guard the railway. Soon America came in; he was then directed to factory work.

The Americans put up a camp overlooking the Seine, and though the English had surprised us by their clean appearance and smart uniforms the Americans surprised us even more. Their hats made a devastating impression, and Paris immediately invented a feminine adaptation. The women all went to work wearing these fantastic shapes in red, mauve, blue, and green. Any woman who neglected this important innovation was laughed at. Thus began the wearing of a felt hat at any time of the year; previously hats were exclusively of straw in spring and summer. The American hat vogue, as such, did not, of course, last long. Only in Paris can a fashion descend upon the population overnight, become a sort of madness, and then disappear as suddenly as it came.

Bread was now rationed; sugar, coffee, chocolate, and oil were rare. Rough table wine was no longer to be had. We were obliged to queue for hours. Mother and I left the house very early and began to queue for a so-called superior wine which alone was obtainable. Not only was it more expensive, but the bottles were sealed with coloured metal paper, with the result that we could no longer add tap water to my father's wine as we

normally did. We would come home soaked, chilled, thoroughly miserable. My mother would go back to bed for an hour; I would run off to school, not knowing my lessons, having no time for homework. On my way home I would look round to see if there were likely queues in the shops. I became an expert, and my mother, delighted, used to give me five francs with which to buy anything we needed. I learned how to slip unnoticed towards the top of a queue and then glide in again after I had been served to obtain two portions of coffee or sugar. Twice a week there were tobacco queues in which soldiers on leave had priority. Soldiers would lend their military cloaks to civilians to take advantage of this privilege in which we, the women, queuing up for husbands or fathers, had no possibility of joining. My mother would become very bitter spending so much time getting cold and wet for tobacco and wine for my father. It made her hate him at times, I think. For me it became a sport. I would even seize a soldier's hand as he was going up the queue and take advantage of his preferred treatment. On such mornings I was let off going to school. When it was very cold my mother and I would try to warm ourselves with a sharp walk, and on these occasions we went to call on Mme Gaillard, knocking with an umbrella handle on the window of her lodge, being asked to go in for a cup of coffee while she was dressing.

Her husband was now bedridden, immobile beside his still lovingly tended plants. She herself, who once knew every corner of Paris, no longer moved from her doorkeeper's lodge and was growing fat. The last of her private customers had disappeared. Her business had disintegrated. She told us that Mme Valentin, worn out by work, was dead. We would leave her, promising to come again, but secretly resolved to find a gayer way of getting warm, and if we were lucky we might chance on another pound of coffee or tea on the way home.

Amongst our new neighbours there was a family from the Auvergne called Alexis. Jules, the father, was red-haired and a drunkard, his nose horribly tumefied: Mme Alexis, though not much more than forty, was so exhausted by putting children into the world that she looked an old woman. If anybody questioned Mme Alexis about the number of her children she would begin to count them on her fingers thus:

'There was Marie, she makes one; there is Jules, two; there was Valentine, three; and then Paul, four; oh, and there were the twins, Berthe and Jeanne, they would make six; then the imbecile who died, he made seven; there's Blanche who is married, she makes eight; my little Louis, nine; the red-haired girl Maimaine, ten; Henriette, eleven; and Maurice, the youngest, makes twelve.'

The fun of seeing Mme Alexis enumerating her children, finger by finger, was such that we never failed to ask innocently:

'How many children have you in all, Mme Alexis?'

Then she would begin:

'There was Marie, she makes one . . . ' At the town hall, where she often sought relief, this unusual way of counting her children annoyed the employees. Poor Mme Alexis could never remember that the enumeration totalled twelve. Each time the figure came to her as a surprise. We would say to her:

'But, Mme Alexis, why don't you think of a dozen eggs? A dozen! It's easy.'

Then she would become very angry and shout out that we were insulting her, comparing her to a hen.

Nearly every night the sirens wailed to tell us there was a German aeroplane over Paris. Then Mme Alexis would become crazy with fear, and gathering up her youngest child she would hide with him at the bottom of a dark cupboard. Crouching, like a stone figure, this normally noisy woman would not make a sound. She became a mere bundle of rags, her eyes looking up at one with pitiful supplication. To try to calm her we went to her place as soon as the warning sounded. She liked to have a great crowd of people round her, or, more accurately, in front of her, for their presence would not prevent her from seeking the comfort of the cupboard, the door of which, as a concession when we were about, she would leave open. Germaine, called Maimaine, her tenth child, the red-haired one, had a pale milky skin; Henriette, the eleventh, dark, with gentle blue eyes, warm and full of perversity, was my age. Maimaine was already the housewife; she prepared the soup for the evening meal, washed up mountains of crockery, cleverly, without a sound, without a glimmer of revolt! She put the younger ones to bed in beds which unfolded like cages all along the wall, and would then slip into hers with Henriette. There was one bed in this strange dormitory which was seldom slept in. It belonged to the boy

Louis, sixteen years old, his mother's favourite child, dark as she was with blue eyes which looked at you deliciously under long black lashes, a mouth like a ripe cherry, an angelic face with no sign yet of hair on the chin, and a delicate white neck emerging from a dirty, creased collar. Little Louis was the prettiest child in the world. He was a pleasure to look at, though, of course, he filled one with apprehension. These candid charms hid a store of wickedness. He would only work in fits and starts, for instance, after a gendarme had called or after a quarrel with his father. The other days and nights he ran off to companions on the fortifications wearing the traditional red scarf. He cajoled his mother, knew to a nicety how to kiss every woman, and all, irrespective of age, fell willingly under his spell. Mme Alexis opened her purse: he would sleep at home for a night or two, then, after tenderly kissing her, would disappear. Just before dawn, during an air raid, he hurried in, took off his cap, his red scarf, and his linen shoes, and went to bed. In the morning the police came, but he found all the house to witness that he had been home since the previous evening.

Jules, the eldest, was at the front where he was not brave. At home he was the apache Louis would soon become, the formed man who, to tame women, made use of his strength, whereas Louis was still in the stage of charming them. On leave he looked wonderful in his blue uniform, but black revolt lurked behind his smooth forehead. Paul, the next, was monstrously ugly, like his father, but his nerves were magnificent. He deserted and hid in our cellar. Maimaine used to bring his food. He might have remained there longer if a tenant had not heard him snore. He was taken hurriedly to another cellar, but he must have found this life monotonous, for he was soon with his companions on the fortifications, stealing their women, holding them to ransom, and leading a joyous life till he was denounced and shot by a firing squad at Vincennes. Mme Alexis was broken-hearted to think that her son had ended in this way: Jules, while on leave, had volunteered to work in a munition factory, and just as he was due to go back to the army he managed to upset a carboy of chemicals on his leg. He was rushed to hospital with severe burns and escaped being sent to Verdun, but now, with what had happened to Paul, Mme Alexis trembled to think what her little Louis would do.



Jules grew fat and well in hospital, where his sister Blanche, a superb girl with flaming red hair like mother's, used to come and see him, and turn the heads of all the patients. Now, suddenly, Mme Alexis was going to have another baby, though suddenly is not the right word. She was several months pregnant, but her body was so misshapen that we had none of us noticed that she had grown fatter. She said it made up for losing Paul—one had been shot as a deserter, a thirteenth was on the way. Blanche was also going to have a baby, with the result that Mme Alexis would be simultaneously mother and grandmother. Poor Mme Alexis suffered a great deal from her condition, continued to work hard, and worried about her children from morning till night, whilst her husband, quite oblivious to anything that was not a glass of wine or a tot of rum, took no notice either of his wife or his children. Money was plentiful in the family, though nobody knew where it came from. Maimaine was making the layette for the new arrivals. Henriette went to school with me. She was a terrible little liar, but had the queer charm of pretty Louis and knew too well that school could teach her nothing about life, that all she had to do was to exercise patience. She said to me: 'You understand, Madeleine, at fifteen and three months I shall get myself married by an old man. I shall leave him. That will make me free and of age. I shall be able to do what I like. Good-bye to mother Alexis and all the family! Not so silly, am I?'

During the early spring a generous and wealthy woman invited a number of girls from our school to spend a fortnight in a property she owned at Vauancourt in the Oise. I was a member of the chosen group. We were lodged in a grange, but were well fed and were out all day. I came back with pink cheeks and my clothes full of lice.

I immediately started queuing up again with Henriette and Maimaine, who had grown more expert than I. Unfortunately their methods brought them into such ill repute that I thought it wiser to operate on my own. This, too, had disadvantages. We waged a war of opposing gangs. My mother had a new friend called Mme Maurer, whom she had met at the Alexis flat, and I used to queue up for her as well as for my mother and Marguerite Rosier.

This Mme Maurer had a well-brought-up aspect which seemed quite out of place in our hard, bitter world. She spoke a French

as pure as ours was deficient and slangy, but though everything we did should have shocked her, her eyes twinkled with amusement each time she spent an evening with the Alexis family. About sixty, corpulent, continually in physical pain, a noted atheist, she lived modestly with her son, who was about thirty. Their flat was the one next to that occupied by Mme Alexis. I heard her complain one day, but not bitterly, that having run out of oil and coffee she could get no more because she was not strong enough to stand in a queue. I repeated this to my mother, who sent me next day with some coffee, oil, and chocolate, the exact value being discreetly marked in pencil on the wrapping paper.

Mme Maurer asked me to come in; our flats were exactly alike, but I was very surprised to see the out-of-date furniture which seemed to be grouped in front of a portrait of Napoleon III. Another portrait showed a gentleman of the same period with the Legion of Honour across his chest. This was Mme Maurer's father, a famous actor of the Imperial Theatre who had received his medal from the emperor in person. There was another portrait of a bearded man, clearly of more recent date. He reminded me in a general way of M. Poincaré, the then president of France. This was M. Maurer, her late husband.

This strange woman moved with dignity amongst her Second Empire furniture, under the gaze of these three unsmiling men. There was no portrait of a woman, not even a photograph, but Mme Maurer, now that she was old, was becoming so masculine in her features that she seemed to make a fourth with the portraits on the wall. Her high, powerful forehead had no hair falling on it, her nose was straight and large of the type known as *bourbonien*, her double chin gave her an expression of will power, and her voice was deep and manly. This first glimpse of her might easily have put us off had she not quickly displayed a kinder, more sensitive side, and even these qualities would not, I fancy, have been enough. What drew us towards her was her love of beautiful things. My mother, in spite of her ill fortune, sensed what was beautiful. Her genius for working blouses of rich lace and of instinctively putting together the loveliest dress, was proof of inborn gifts. You should have seen her handle a material and judge it. She read voraciously, like Marie-Thérèse, but managed in some curious way to read books that were excellently

written. Being poor she had taste, whereas many, being rich, do not have it. I also was at an age when I may have been starving for an appreciation of the beautiful. This Mme Maurer imperceptibly took my literary education in hand and excited my imagination to the highest degree. On Thursday when I took her the coffee, the oil, and the other little things, she would do the accounts with me, treating me not like a child, but like a grown responsible woman, and would afterwards take me to the room she shared with her son and show me miniatures hidden in drawers. She lent me books which precipitated me into a world I knew nothing about.

She had known personally the Comtesse de Ségur, whose books for little girls form the jewels of the *Bibliothèque Rose*. She was scrupulously tidy, which we at home never were. Everything was put away, ticketed, dusted, laid lovingly in little boxes. I think it was her son who did this when he came home in the evening. They had spent so many years moving from one apartment to another, each fresh one meaner and more cramped than the last, that being tidy was their only way of keeping anything. As we saw more of each other she would come on a visit to our apartment on the opposite side of the street. I would do my lessons or sew by the window. Mme Maurer sat between the table and the cooking stove. Mother, of course, would be sewing. Mme Maurer would begin to tell us whatever might have happened during the morning or in the course of the night, it being rare that the whole house was not wakened by a violent quarrel between Jules Alexis and one or other of his children, and, starting to reminisce in her deep voice, she would take us back into her past. Then we would hear the sound of galloping horses. She had travelled from Paris to Chartres in a stage-coach; she had kept rendezvous with famous men in closed carriages, the blinds drawn; she adored de Musset and his *grisettes*; spoke of Mimi Pinson as of a sweet friend; had lived and loved in Paris when people said of it: Paris—the paradise for women. ‘How many gold pieces! How much misery!’ was her frequent comment. Love still beat in her heart. Like Marie-Thérèse she had cut out a vast number of serials from the newspapers, binding them together, putting them away to read and to lend, the first novels of George Sand, Jules Sandeau, Balzac, Victor Hugo, and Dumas *père et fils*. These

dead giants had been alive in her day. She had known Théophile Gautier, adored Zola. Her enthusiasm set us upon a phrenetic course of reading. When she was sad or depressed, as women so often are for no reason, or perhaps because we are happy, she would not say: 'I have the *cafard*,' as the women in our street said, but 'I have the *spleen*,' which is Baudelairian. This word came strangely to us, but soon mother began to have the *spleen* and, of course, so did I. Mme Maurer sang adorably the airs of Offenbach, and had danced the can-can. She had seen the czar, the czarina, the grand duchesses, the kings and queens who still sat on their thrones, for Russia was still 'the steam-roller,' and the Balkans had their states—and yet she had been in Paris during the Commune, living with her parents and her three sisters in a magnificent house in the ancient rue des Saints-Pères on the left bank where her father, the great actor, received the writers of the day. She took me once to see it, for she cultivated her memories like flowers in a garden. On anniversaries such as the death of her father or of her mother, instead of visiting their graves, she went to see the places where they had been happy. Thus she and I stood in front of the house in the rue des Saints-Pères, feeling rather scared that the doorkeeper would come out to shoo us away. There was a beautiful door with glass and wrought iron, through which we could see the inner courtyard. 'There,' she said, 'when I was four, having just returned from Chartres by coach, I hid in a corner and started to sing, oh, but with all my soul! My father came down those steps and told my mother in his deep actor's voice that it was a scandal to let a street singer come into the courtyard of a house like his.'

She loved the streets of Paris, and on some trivial excuse, like wanting a piece of ribbon, she would walk interminably. She took us to the Bon Marché, and thus taught us the left bank. My love of walking interminably through a great city comes from her.

Her mother was from Chartres, her father was Parisian. The three daughters had almost immediately been marked by fate as if the wrong fairies had attended their births. The eldest at the age of sixteen had an intestinal obstruction which for five months prevented her from clearing her bowels. No laxative was of any use. She was given pints of oil and large quantities of milk; the Paris faculty, interested in this strange case, prescribed liquids

and completely starved her. The parents did not know how to take their meals without increasing the misery of this young girl who was dying of hunger. She would ask them in a beseeching voice for a crust of bread, just a crust of bread, but her parents, having been told by the most learned doctors that the slightest morsel of solid food would prove fatal, energetically refused, and hid everything in locked cupboards. She became enormous and was hardly able to walk, but her legs and arms were terribly thin. Her cheerfulness was extraordinary, and being a born actress she would ask for her little piece of bread dramatically after the manner of Rachel, or in the droll way of a character out of Molière, and she would make her family laugh till they wept, though in secret, knowing that she must die, their tears were real. One day at supper during a severe thunderstorm, she as usual eating nothing, the thunder shaking the old house in the rue des Saints-Pères, the young girl suddenly rose, as pale as if she had seen a ghost, and cried out: 'Quickly the pan! Bring me the pan!' Her weakness, this hallucination in the middle of a storm, her wild eyes convinced everybody that the end, foretold by the doctors, had arrived; her mother hurriedly fetched the pan, put it down in a corner of the room, and tenderly arranged her daughter on it. An explosion like another clap of thunder, followed by an appalling smell of sulphur, made them wonder if their house had not been hit; then they saw their daughter, bent in two, laughing as if she had lost her mind. The parents' joy, when they understood, was immense, but their daughter remained in this posture till several doctors interested in this terrible case arrived, and eventually announced that the great amount of liquid the patient had absorbed had ended by forcing down a cancer complete with its adhesions.

I am not surprised that my homework made little progress. School books lay pushed aside; I preferred to sew. Little girls in poor families, in Paris at any rate, become quickly aware of the fundamentals of life and death. Things are not hidden from them, and they accordingly grow more sensitive to the pain and sorrow of others. Tragedy does alight on certain families like a great black bird on its victims. If this had not happened in the case of Mme Maurer's family she might still have been living in a lovely house on the left bank of the Seine. In fact the eldest sister, delivered of her cancer, recovered, and marrying had lovely

children, but one would have said that fate, having made this experiment, was anxious to try its hand again. The next thing told by Mme Maurer in her slow, beautiful, but rather out-of-date French concerned the second sister, and happened when Annette was fifteen.

Their father was rehearsing a new play, in which his important scene was with a young actor, discovered by him in the provinces, who was to stay at the rue des Saints-Pères till he could find a suitable lodging of his own. Every morning in the drawing-room the father and his protégé would rehearse the difficult passage. The young man became almost a member of the family, but though he was charming to look at neither the mother nor the daughters liked him; indeed Annette had such a dislike of him that she had great difficulty in not showing it, and her father made several angry scenes, saying that by this piece of girlish stupidity she risked antagonizing the young man and causing a quarrel before the opening night. All this made little difference. When Annette looked at the young actor anybody could see how she hated him.

Mme Maurer was then ten, and the two little girls slept in the same bed. Their mother came to kiss them good night; the youngest was soon asleep, but Annette, after some hours, crept out and went to join the young actor whom she loathed, but who each night took advantage of her.

She became pregnant, and soon the parents were convinced that she was going to have the same cancer as the eldest girl. One night she began her labour and gave birth to a little girl in the bed which the two young sisters still shared. The young man had disappeared, having left Paris as soon as the play had finished. Annette was sent to a convent till she was twenty; the parents, unforgiving, never allowed Annette back in the house. Mme Maurer could not tell what had happened to Annette or to the child.

The story made us shudder, whereupon Mme Maurer, turning to my mother, said: 'When I told you, Mme Gal, that nothing ordinary ever happened to us! My parents viewed their lovely house in the rue des Saints-Pères in disgust—or perhaps they were ashamed; at all events they sold it, and went to live in Chartres, where my mother started a little business in men's shirts. Two or three girls were engaged. I also was put to

work cutting and sewing. My mother was much older than my father. What had happened to Annette had turned her from a good-looking woman of middle age to an old woman. Her shirt business in her native town was a gentle employment in which she could nurse her infirmities, but my father, rested, his nerves recovered, his fine personality admired and fêted in this small provincial town, became such a youthful and popular figure that my mother was made miserable by a sudden, burning jealousy. Soon her life became intolerable. For all the rest of us it became a purgatory. My father, who was very good, very serious, would never have been unfaithful to my mother, but he had a charm when speaking to anybody that he could no more hide than the nose in the middle of his face. He hated to see his wife so unhappy, but the nicer he was with her the more convinced was she that he was trying to buy her pardon.

‘Soon my father’s happiness was sapped by the life my mother led him. He lost his colour, had the spleen, refused to eat, and soon fell ill. My mother, delighted to have him exclusively in her care, nursed him like a she-wolf with her young. She left the little factory entirely in my hands and would not move from my father’s room. He, as good as ever, recited his roles to her as he had done when they were first married. My mother’s joy was immense. Her happiness increased as my father’s physical break-up became more apparent, but it did not last long. My father died in his sleep one morning; my mother, discovering a phial of laudanum, swallowed it, and fell in agonizing pain beside her dead husband.’

Mme Maurer looked up and added simply:

‘I was nineteen. When everything was sold I came to Paris and found work as a seamstress in a men’s shirt factory.’

Now, because she was young, began for her that life in Paris which could be so wonderful for a pretty woman. There was, of course, no question of a rich marriage. She had to do what any young woman did in those days who wanted to succeed—she became the mistress of a diplomat, a married man and famous, distinguished, much older, rich, and selfish. He understood nothing of her difficulties. When coming to see her in her little flat he would express surprise at her frugality; she had not the courage to tell him that she had nothing to eat. A clever woman would have known how to excite pity. She was always butting

up against her pride. 'Boldness, that 's what was missing in me!' she would cry. 'Without daring a woman gets nowhere!' She paused a moment to give full effect to this exposure of a failing which she believed had ruined her life. She went on: 'I was pretty. I had a magnificent voice. I ought to have been a big success in the theatre, or just in life itself, but no, this damnable timidity prevented me from doing anything, and now that I 've conquered it it 's too late. Some people say one shouldn't talk before little girls, but I 'm telling you this, Madeleine, so that you shall remember that what you want in life you must ask for. It 's all very well being proud and waiting for destiny to bring it along on a silver dish, but that 's merely romanticism. If you have read Grimm you will know that fairies always asked little girls what they wanted.'

'Oh, yes,' exclaimed my mother, putting down her needle and looking wistfully out of the window. 'I who have always blushed, always been timid. You see what has happened to me!'

Not anxious for my mother to break into the story I said to Mme Maurer impatiently:

'What happened after that?'

'With the diplomat, you mean? Oh, well, in spite of all the care he took, his diplomatic caution, one might say, I became pregnant.' She turned to my mother, knowingly. 'I let myself slip from a hackney coach in the Bois de Boulogne, I washed down the walls, I did things I wasn't used to doing, nothing was any help. My friend left me. They always do when you want them most. He was a coward, afraid of scandal, afraid of what his wife might discover.'

She had a son, who was difficult to bring up, probably because she was not rich enough to give him the things he needed. There was also the fall from the hackney coach which might have done him harm. She met Louis Maurer, who was employed at one of the toll-houses which, until quite recently, were set up all round the Paris fortifications. He married her, took a great liking to her son, to whom he was anxious to give his name, but she refused. Louis Maurer had not made her happy, but she spoke of him tenderly and with gratitude. He had a stroke, partially recovered, but became mad in a harmless, quite amusing way. He would accuse the king of England of stealing his razor, and then go out for long walks forgetting who he was and where he



lived. Finally he was taken to Villejuif where he died shortly before the war. Her son was now draughtsman in an aeroplane factory.

One Sunday when my parents were still at table, I, looking out of the window waiting for a sign from my mother to go with Maimaine and Henriette Alexis to play in the street, I saw a *chasseur alpin* going into the house on the opposite side of the road where we had lodged on our return from Blois. A few moments later he came out and crossed to our side. Steps climbed the stairs. Our door bell rang, and when I opened I found myself looking up into the dark eyes of Henri Toulouse, the husband of the lovely Ernestine. All the warmth of the *midi* came with him into the room. A little stockier, wider in the shoulders, his dark blue beret over one eye, he was still very good-looking. He had an arm in a sling. Poor Henri! At last we felt sorry for him! My father greeted him in patois, sat him down at table, and my mother poured him out some freshly made coffee.

My father's deep voice broke out:

'Tell us all about your campaigns, Henri!'

Well, he had come from Nice. He had been in Italy, and now they were probably going to send him to the eastern front. He and his companions had spent a long time in the train. He had leant out of the window, and a train coming in the opposite direction had grazed his arm, and so he had gone to hospital to have it put in a sling. My father exclaimed:

'Just like me and my hat!'

So that was Henri Toulouse's glorious wound! Mother and I broke into peals of laughter. He seemed puzzled by this hilarity, and turning to my father asked him in patois what had happened to his hat.

'Oh!' exclaimed my father, 'I was looking out of the window too. I was afraid the train had passed Paris without my knowing it.'

My mother, who was tired of the story of the hat, said to Toulouse:

'Please, M. Toulouse, give us some more details about the accident.'

He looked reassured by her change of tone and answered:

'That's all about the accident, but thanks to this sling I've had a wonderful time in Paris. The young women offer me

their seats in the underground. Of course, I don't dare tell them how it happened. In fact I just let them understand it was on the battle-field. *Péchère!* They don't know me, and they'll never see me again, but I'm sorry Ernestine wasn't there to see my success in the capital!

'Yes,' agreed my mother dryly, 'it is a pity.'

Henri Toulouse drank his coffee, stretched out his legs, and answered:

'Oh, but I shall have to stay in Paris several weeks because of my wound. Ernestine who has never been here yet will have a permit to come.'

She arrived two days later, and we were obliged to put her up. She was still a fine-looking girl, but her sparkle was less brilliant than at the Grand' Combe. She was very much the matured woman, more so than one would have expected for her twenty-two years, and her love for Toulouse was undimmed. The war had prevented her from setting up a home of her own. She was still living with her parents on the mountain, and was delighted to come to Paris, but though she spoke up very boldly in patois when she was with us she was terrified when she had to cross the road alone.

One day when Ernestine and I had gone to spend the day with an aunt of Henri Toulouse who lived in Paris, Place des Vosges, I took advantage of our being together in a corner of the kitchen to ask her what had happened to her first fiancé, my friend Louis Verdier, whose sad face still haunted me.

'Oh, that one!' she exclaimed. 'Well, would you believe it? Though he had never done his military service he volunteered on the 3rd August, and was immediately killed in the front line. The poor boy! His mother is still bitter with me because they found a photograph of me next to his heart, and she accuses me of having killed him! Between you and me I don't believe a word of it: I don't say he wasn't fond of me, but a man doesn't die for the love of a girl.'

She had raised her voice. Her aunt was peeling the potatoes by the sink. This woman had a son on leave who had been wandering through the flat in his sky-blue soldier's trousers, and with his shirt-sleeves rolled up. He looked at Ernestine and asked:

'How can you say that a man doesn't die for the love of a girl? Haven't you ever read the *Arlésienne*?'

'No,' she answered, uninterested. 'I don't know any Arlésienne. I've never been that way.'

He shrugged his shoulders and started to whistle *La Madelon* without even deigning to look at her again.

That evening, while we were all having supper in a little restaurant in the avenue de Clichy, Ernestine said over the dessert:

'By the way, Toulouse, you have been about a bit, do you know a story about an Arlésienne—some young man who died for the love of her?'

'No,' answered Henri Toulouse. 'Why?'

'Little Madeleine wanted to know what had happened to Louis Verdier, and when I told her that Mme Verdier accused me of having been the cause of his death that young cousin of yours asked me if I knew the story of the Arlésienne. Your young cousin is awfully good-looking, isn't he? I notice you never told me anything about him. He knows Paris very well, and practically invited me to go to the theatre with him. You wouldn't mind, would you, Toulouse? He would take little Madeleine too.' She turned her large eyes on me and added: 'Honestly, you bring me luck. Every time we go around together I find a new gallant!'

Henri Toulouse looked down at his plate. I was not sorry for this small revenge.

My father was delighted to have his niece in the house; but he never could keep awake in the evening, and when Ernestine said to him: 'Come now, Uncle Milou, surely you're not going to sleep during the whole of my stay?' the name of Milou struck a chord in his heart. Milou! He was forty-three and nobody ever called him that any more. It was the name his mother and grandmother had called him. Yes, that was right. Milou was the name of the young miner so much admired by his elders, the little boy who caught frogs in the Gardon, the lad who would shout at the top of his voice under the Roman arches of the Pont du Gard. All the lads would call after him. Milou! Milou! Milou! But however hard he tried to keep awake, sleep would come. He fell back in his chair and closed his eyes like the little Milou who would come home so tired after running after thrushes and cutting his knee on a sharp stone. My mother would look down at him and say: 'He's up at dawn. It's a long day. And he's not so young as he was.'

# I4

**A** PART from the hymns that Mlle Zélie made us sing, and her delightful readings of the New Testament, my religious instruction was neglected. I never saw my father or my mother in prayer. Marie-Thérèse was equally neglectful of Rolande. My mother and my aunt had no memory of the beautiful convent of the Ursulines at Blois but the sweeping out of the class-rooms. Of the litanies they recited in their beds at home next to their deaf and sleeping mother, nothing remained but bitterness and irony.

In our street the separation of church and state was clearly successful. Hardly anybody went to church, and the few who did were immediately put down as being bigoted: they became objects of scorn, not of veneration. When a person died in our street he went directly from his mean apartment to his last resting-place without passing by the church. There were few baptisms. If little girls received their first communion it was to wear the dress and give the parents an excuse to feast at home.

Mme Maurer, who by now was exerting a considerable influence on my mother, both for good and for ill, found no difficulty in making her renounce what was left of her religious beliefs. Life had plunged this embittered woman in a bath of steel. Her eyes had been opened wide, from childhood, on the more ghastly aspects of our mortal existence, and she would say: 'At my age, Mme Gal, one becomes a mere looker-on at life. I fill my lungs with air, I drink and eat, but I cease to feel anything, even pain. I ought to be grateful for the fun I get out of watching others. The Alexis family, for instance, with all their pointless fussing about, give me a tremendous amount of amusement.'

My mother saw nothing funny about the Alexis family. She judged them harshly, blaming their loose living, but insensibly I began under Mme Maurer's tuition to be more indulgent, to see the unusual and picturesque in people, to become in short an

onlooker. A sudden bout of reading, also under this woman's guidance, began to form, though curiously, my young intelligence. After playing wildly in the traffic or under the fortifications with Maimaine and Henriette, I would return dishevelled, dirty, unrecognizable, and discover in some novel by Gyp a whole existence of châteaux and rich people which seemed to me of another planet. I wept over George Sand's *Indiana*, but sunshine filled my day when François le Champi married the girl he loved. The Montmartre cemetery became a place of pilgrimage after reading the *Dame aux Camélias*; nightmares broke my sleep; waking I would see my mother looking like an icon, a tiny, shaded, flickering lamp beside her golden hair, for it had become a habit with her also to read nearly all night.

On half-holidays Henriette and I and another little girl with immense dark eyes called Hélène, played while poor Maimaine was finishing the washing-up. Then, as soon as she was free, we would go off and look for snails under the fortifications or rush across the public gardens under the nose of the scandalized keeper.

One afternoon, when our gang was complete, I exclaimed:

'Maimaine, mustn't it be wonderful, a real drawing-room with arm-chairs and tables and flowers all over the place?'

'Like at the theatre?' she asked.

'Yes, but in a theatre it isn't real. Nobody really lives in it.'

'I suppose it must be beautiful,' said Maimaine. 'A room where you don't sleep and you don't eat.'

'Well, what's the point of it?' asked little Hélène.

'You talk, you play the piano, and gentlemen ask you to marry them.'

'Then let's go and find a drawing-room!' said Henriette.

In the Avenue des Fêtes there were some pretty villas owned by engineers of the great aeroplane factories. One of these villas had a balconied window, fat and rounded, at which we had often watched a maid shaking her feather broom, beating cushions of coloured silk, and generally occupying herself with much more flippant material than any of us were accustomed to see in our own homes. This balcony became our rallying place. As we took counsel underneath it formed a sort of crown over our heads. When it rained we would seek its shelter. Just

now, being summer, the window was always open, and one afternoon, having seen the maid go off with a shopping basket under her arm, we determined to clamber up and see for ourselves what a drawing-room really looked like.

We hoisted H  l  ne, the smallest, up first. She resisted, but we were anxious to compromise her so that she would keep quiet about what we had done. As soon as H  l  ne was inside Maimaine, Henriette, and I gently let ourselves through the half-open window, and shaking with emotion and fear entered the little drawing-room with its red and gold arm-chairs, its nice thick carpet, and bright cream walls. We were longing, of course, to sit in the chairs, but we clambered out into the street almost as fast as we had come in. I then discovered that I had left my woollen scarf in the drawing-room. We were all much too frightened to go back and fetch it; on the other hand, I was equally afraid of my mother, who was not forgiving when it came to lost clothing.

Maimaine and Henriette had gone off to make the evening soup, little H  l  ne was back with her mother, I stood scarfless and very undecided on the threshold of our house when Mme Maurer, seeing me from her window, beckoned me to come in. She asked me what I had on my mind, and when I told her she said:

'It's a nuisance that you left your scarf in the drawing-room of those bourgeois—it might get you into trouble—but you were right to go in. You must always do what you want, only next time don't drag that gang of girls round the place with you. They will lie, swear they were not with you, and probably denounce you. Their kind are not brave. You know that! Go home, don't say a word to your mother, and begin reading *Eug  nie Grandet*. That ought to cure you of Gyp's drawing-rooms!'

During the holidays of 1918 a list of girls was drawn up at our school to attend a camp in Normandy. Mme Maurer strongly advised my mother to let me go. We were to meet at the Gare Saint-Lazare, each wearing a blue ribbon in the lapel of our coat. One of the mistresses would be waiting under the clock.

As soon as the train started to move we became so excited that our mistress, anxious to calm us, suggested that we should look what our mothers had packed for us in the small wicker baskets

which each girl had been asked to bring. We accordingly unpacked our hard-boiled eggs, our fruit, our chocolate, exchanging these delicacies with our neighbours. After what seemed to us an interminable journey we reached Caen, and from there we took a tiny train, through rich orchards, to Ver-sur-Mer, where I saw the sea for the first time.

We were to lodge in a large house with a big garden overlooking the wide stretch of golden sand. Our dormitories were cool and agreeable; the refectory was composed of a long table with straw-backed chairs; at the head of the table we found a pile of New Testaments, hymn books, and a long sharp bread knife. Every day we took turns to help in the kitchen, lay the table, cut the bread into even slices. For breakfast we had bowls of milk and coffee, and after prayers we were free to go to the sands.

We would come back when the churches of Ver, of Asnelles, and of Arromanches sounded the angelus. Their deep tones were impressive in the calm of the fields. The sea grumbled distantly.

The farm was pretty, and when the woman was not there we used to play with her little boy of three, who waited for us, and whom we covered with kisses. One evening as we were crossing the cornfield with our milk-pails we heard, instead of the angelus, a lugubrious tolling, and we became sad, so near seemed death in the quiet of the country. When we reached the farm we discovered that the bell was tolling for the little boy who that afternoon had been drowned in a cattle pool. We filed past his bed. His colourless face was unlike the happy features we had learnt to love. His poor body seemed taller under the white sheet. Sadly we went back to our dormitory, but none of us slept. We cried. We called for our parents. We longed to go back to Paris where there was noise and life.

As the holidays lasted two months I had the whole of September to play in the street. The waste land under the fortifications was becoming powdery, the grass was tough and yellow, there were thistles, but no flowers. Occasionally, if it had been raining, my father and I left very early on Sunday morning to look for snails. We would follow the river bank as far as a poor little café (we call them *guinguettes*) by the Seine, where my father would order a glass of wine and fried potatoes. He always claimed

that the wine was served in too thick glasses and that he was being cheated, this remark being in the form of an aside to me in patois. Though these expeditions were charming I missed Sunday school, and this affected me more than I dared tell my father.

Our clergyman was a chaplain to the Forces; the headmaster of the boys' school accordingly took the service on Sundays. He was a rough-spoken Alsatian with a very strong accent. He would climb into the pulpit with a menacing look, as if aware of the sad fact that once there he could no longer pull the ears of his pupils. M. Brandt was the most ardent Protestant. Once he had ceased to worry about his tiresome little boys he reached heights of ecstasy, speaking of the Saviour as of a personal friend. When he prayed, asking protection for our clergyman, who was in the front line, imploring for victory, his voice, in spite of its accent, moved us. Then, as if for a moment taking leave of heaven, he would descend from the pulpit mumbling, seize upon a couple of his boys, whom he would march off to the sacristy, and then very quietly mount his stall and announce the number of the next hymn.

He knew excellently how to interpret the Scriptures. The wife of our clergyman, surrounded by her five children, all of rare beauty, helped and encouraged him. Before the end of the service he would go to the door, of which only one side was opened, and await our passing. He would extend a large, dry hand, inquire about our parents, their work and their health, and when it came to the turn of the boys he would squeeze their hands, bless them, if possible with even more goodness, and then, having closed the church door, would return into the choir stalls, where he would bend his head in fervent personal prayer. We were asked to do all we could to bring our parents to church. On Monday they would promise to come; on Tuesday they would still come, but as the week went on they became increasingly tired, and by Sunday all their good resolutions were gone. I tried desperately to bring my father and mother. I would have liked to show them the place where I discovered my most intense happiness. My father was the chief stumbling-block, not from any hardness of heart, but merely from bashfulness and an inability to pray. When we began lunch my father would say to me with affectionate mockery: 'Well, Madelon, what did your



shepherd say to you to-day?' I immediately began to repeat the sermon to the best of my understanding and memory. My father would listen with interest, show surprise that we were taught in such clear language, and end by being rather moved. This Sunday school language destined for children suited him admirably, was just enough, and filled him with gentle thoughts, but when I had finished he would say: 'You see, Madelon, you speak so well, you make all their ideas so clear to me that why should I put on my shoes, the ones that are so painful, to go to listen to M. Brandt? You must tell me the rest next Sunday.'

One evening when we were still at supper our clergyman, who had just arrived on leave, looked in. In his beautiful dark blue uniform, with the chaplain's chain and cross, he looked like a crusader returning from the Holy Land. He sat at our table and spoke little. My father admired and respected him. He knew that every moment of his leave would be given to his parishioners; that he liked to call in the evening when the head of the house would be at home. He avoided speaking of religion, but told us about his children, discussed his personal problems, the course of the war, and my coming first communion. Then he shook hands, saying:

'Well, M. Gal, I shan't see you on Sunday. I'm going back to the front. The boys out there need me pretty badly.'

We heard him going down the stairs, passing out into the dark night. My father went to bed, saying:

'That's a saintly man.'

My mother began to sew for the women in the factories. Some of them worked in the same place as my father. They dressed gaily: light-coloured stockings, shoes with very high heels. We would see them step carefully on the paving-stones so as not to sprain their ankles. Their hair would be waved in the new Marcel fashion, tied down in a net. They found it difficult to spend the money they earned, and smelt of perfume and machine oil. They came in droves from Paris for the night shift, made up, full of energy, meeting others on the way back to Montmartre wearing high boots of coloured leather laced on the calf as was then the fashion. As both lots, those going to work and those returning home, came face to face with young prostitutes they would good-naturedly throw them coarse sallies, asking if they were not in need of a screwdriver or a little grease. Often the

prostitutes, amused by the spontaneous wit of the factory women, broke out in swift replies and merry laughter.

My companions and I had a friend who exercised this profession that so many of us, prettier girls, grew up to. Her name was Didine, and she was fine looking and gentle hearted. Dark, made like a mare, broad hips and thin legs, she was the tender mistress of an Italian shoemaker of the rue Fontaine, a shoemaker who worked exclusively for these ladies. Didine had the most magnificent high boots, heels and ends shiny black, the rest in supple red leather of a kind only the Italians know how to make. Didine Garcia, whose invented name matched her Spanish beauty, lodged on the sixth floor of the house in which Mme Maurer and Mme Alexis lived. She arrived in the morning, slept till four, visited the baker and the dairy, smiled graciously at the *concierge*, climbed up to the sixth, and cooked her steak over a spirit-lamp. As she loved children she would say to us: 'Now, girls, come up in a quarter of an hour. I shall have a surprise for you!' We would run up as fast as we could just in time to see Didine put a match to a magnificent rum omelet, which gave a blue tint to her lovely features, and brought out all the sparkle of her splendid white teeth. She served us, and we would take our plates and sit on her bed, which she had not yet made, and on which her orange lingerie, garnished with black velvet, made us stare with surprise and envy. At six she would send us away. Then she would dress, and an hour later we would see her come out, painted, wearing her lovely boots, smelling good, hardly looking at us, thinking only of what the night would bring her, weighing her chances, possible success, and pleasure.

On these evenings I would sulk in front of my soup. My father would scold; my mother, thinking I was ill, would worry. I dared not say I had been with Didine, and I was afraid Maimaine or Henriette would tell. I knew that out of principle my mother would not approve of these feasts in Didine's flat though actually she rather liked her. Even my father had a certain regard for Didine. She was not proud, was herself the daughter of a workman, and in fact was at home in all spheres. She would disappear for several days; then one morning we would see her newly dressed from head to foot. New boots, new coat or tailor-made, according to the season, exquisite new hat, all proving she had been with an American officer during his leave, that she had lived

with him, loved him, and certainly made him forget his blood bath over in the trenches. She always put his photograph with a pin on the wall. Would she ever see him again? It was unlikely. She did not even know his name. I used to count all these fine officers, American, French, English. She would say: 'They are my brothers!' Even Maimaine, who knew something about large families, thought this was a poor excuse.

Maimaine was worried about her mother. Air-raid alarms were becoming more frequent, and the poor woman, tortured by her pregnancy, was obviously overtired. She was becoming enormous, and one morning Maimaine went off to warn the midwife that her mother was starting labour pains. Maimaine, like a general, arranged the flat: she brought Henriette to us, left Maurice with Mme Maurer, and another with the *concierge*. Little Louis, who had returned in the middle of the night after having disappeared for eight days, was left on his iron bedstead in a corner of the dining-room. The midwife came. The doctor came. There were consultation and arguments and cries of pain from the mother and yells from the new-born. Little Louis, exhausted with adventure and love, slept like an innocent on his iron bedstead. The thirteenth child was a male. His name was George or Jo-Jo, and he was magnificent. He shattered every prediction, every theory. Child of a drunkard, child of a worn-out mother, born in the heat of September, Jo-Jo was simply glorious. We saw him in Maimaine's arms, in Henriette's arms, and whenever I had a chance I took him in my arms. Mme Alexis was not doing well. She was so feeble that she wept, and the doctor was anxious. 'The mother of a large family is the most precious thing on earth,' he used to say to my mother and to Mme Maurer, 'but the poor woman is quite worn out. The baby has taken everything out of her.'

Mme Alexis became stronger. She left her sombre bed and took her favourite place by the window in the dining-room. She was as gay as ever, but if she went downstairs she could not climb up again. One day, when Didine had just come back from one of her long adventures, we all went up to show her Jo-Jo, putting the baby in her bed next to her orange lingerie, she the lovely woman and we the little girls all paying our court to the smiling child. Suddenly we heard a far-away voice in the street crying out for Maimaine, and hurrying to the balcony we saw Blanche,

her own child in her arms, crying at her loudest. Maimaine snatched the baby from Didine's bed and rushed down the six storeys followed by us all. Mme Alexis had just had a heart attack and wanted Jo-Jo. Again she recovered, but the doctor insisted that she must return to her native province, and a few days later she went off with Henriette, Maurice, and Jo-Jo to the Auvergne. Maimaine stayed to look after the father and little Louis. The house seemed empty, and we missed Jo-Jo cruelly. Henriette wrote once, Mme Alexis not knowing how to write or read, and then M. Alexis received a letter from his sister asking him to come quickly. He took the train, but while he was still travelling Maimaine received a telegram to say her mother was dead. She howled like a wild animal, and her magnificent red hair, gay and sparkling, seemed to mock her face streaming with tears. She had to wear mourning. My mother adjusted one of Mme Alexis's own black dresses, and little Maimaine became suddenly a grown woman. Her hair, rolled up, revealed an adorable neck, and the red girl, so often laughed at because of her golden helmet, became so beautiful that we held our breath. Her black dress suited her magnificently. She looked like a pearl in a case of black velvet. M. Alexis came home with Henriette, Maurice, and little Jo-Jo, and Maimaine became the mother of the family.

My mother met Marguerite Rosier in the market. We had been seeing less of her. She would spend several weeks at a time with her mother, now Mme Malgras, in the cottage she and the former baker owned in the country. Hyacinthe was becoming increasingly morose. Terrified by the nightly bombardments of Big Bertha he feared for his life and his situation at the bank. His wife and daughter had a miserable existence; the more money the husband earned the less fun they got out of it.

Marguerite Rosier had met Léontine, the daughter of the late Mme Valentin, the lacemaker. Léontine wanted us all to go and see her. She was still living at St. Ouen, but as her husband was at the front she had found a job in a munitions factory and had become the overseer: one of her daughters was working with her.

We decided that as soon as my father was asleep we would steal out of the house. St. Ouen was not far. All we need do was to follow the Boulevard Victor-Hugo.

When Léontine saw us her lovely dark eyes lit up her face, and though she was pitted by smallpox she appeared almost pretty. The truth is that at last she was happy. Yaya, her daughter, once so thin and disfigured by want, had become grown up and good-looking. Léontine had been lucky. Her husband was at the front, she paid no rent, had the allocation of a soldier's wife, and she and Yaya earned a great deal of money. She said to my mother: 'I've been made to suffer so much from wine that I can't stand it on the table any more. When my husband comes on leave I can see he hasn't changed, that he 'll never change, and so I'm broken-hearted to think that my happiness will end with the war; and yet believe me, Mme Gal, I *do* want the war to finish.'

Léontine would not change her flat. She said she was superstitious and feared that by going elsewhere her luck might alter. After coffee Léontine brought out a pack of cards. She had an amazing gift for telling the future. Marguerite Rosier was the first to hear her fate. Her husband would earn more money. In a few years' time they might even have enough to take a little place in the country. When it was my mother's turn there was no sign of money, just illness and death. 'My poor Matilda,' said Léontine, 'you will soon be a widow. Then you 'll cross the sea and your daughter will marry and have the loveliest clothes, and travel. Her life will be quite different to yours.' My mother turned white. Léontine had repeated in the most curious way what my mother had been told by the bone-setter at Blois!

It was late and we had rather a long walk home in the dark. We were all sad, Lucienne and I holding our mother's hands, the two women discussing what Léontine had foretold. My mother said: 'You see what it is! Léontine has a little happiness at last. You, Marguerite, will have money. But I, nothing good ever comes my way. What do you think I've done to deserve all this? Of course, I would be glad for my daughter to have a better life, but it will be for her. I don't see how it can benefit me.'

Suddenly we heard a terrible cry, followed by others even more dreadful, and we saw a man with a long knife, like the one the ogre held when he was going to cut Tom Thumb's throat. The man ran towards us and we, petrified, remained where we were. Marguerite was the first to recover. Catching hold of Lucienne she ran and ran and ran. The man, surprised by their sudden flight, hesitated a moment, then brandishing his knife, went off

in the opposite direction. My mother, very pale but calm, whispered: 'It's all over. There's no more danger.' However, instead of continuing along the pavement we walked in the middle of the boulevard, the big uneven paving-stones causing us to twist our ankles at every step.

My mother, describing this scene the next day to Mme Maurer said, laughing, that she had thought for a moment that Léontine had made a mistake in her fortune-telling. 'It looked,' she said, 'as if I were the one who was going to die!' Mme Maurer made no comment. She believed neither in God nor in the devil and, in consequence, fortune-tellers left her quite indifferent. My mother was extremely vexed by Marguerite's panic-stricken flight, and I could see that relations might be strained.

The next evening my father came home looking drawn and ill. He refused his soup, and his hand trembled as he shaved. During the afternoon he had been testing an aeroplane engine when his companion was struck by the propeller and killed. This accident had made a deep impression on him. I was asleep when he left in the morning, but all day I kept on thinking of his sad face, so changed and shaken, and in the evening as it was fine I went to wait for him at the factory gates. A crowd had gathered and there were several gendarmes, a fire having broken out in the place where the engines were tested. Nervously I ran through the crowd looking for a known face, and when I recognized some people who lived in our street I exclaimed: 'But what a lot of accidents there must be in this factory! Why, only yesterday my father had his best friend killed by a propeller in front of his eyes.' A strong hand closed in on my arm and an ear was gently twiggled. I looked up and saw a gendarme who said to me: 'Little girl, you are much too talkative. We shall have to find a way of curing you. Suppose you come along with me.'

I was terrified, but the day shift was now pouring out and in the distance I joyfully recognized my father. I ran towards him, and buried my hand in his; as together we passed through the gate, the gendarme raised a finger to his lips and winked at me, but I had already learnt my lesson.

Now came the first days of September, rain falling continuously, turning the street into a grey corridor. One hardly saw anybody about. The women who always had so much to discuss remained on the different landings, gossiping, broom in hand, or

gathered outside the doorkeeper's lodge. Mme Guillet, the doorkeeper of the house in which Mme Maurer and the Alexis family lived, was the wife of a railway driver. This stupid, spendthrift Auvergnat had two daughters, Marie and Louise, and did her dusting in a large white overall with a coloured scarf bound round her head like a dark woman from the East Indies. The turban protected the deep waves that ran across her hair like the tracks on which her husband drove his trains. She brushed the carpets, polished the stairs, cleaned the brass, and at two o'clock removed the coloured scarf and took up a position in front of the house seated on a low chair upholstered in red velvet. The postman arrived, handed her the tenants' letters, which one then saw her examine in detail as if she were the chief censor. When she had satisfied her curiosity she would raise a buttock and slip the letters underneath her. If a tenant came in or out, and there was something for him, she would pass a hand between her posterior and the red velvet chair and bring out the letter which by then was warm and convex.

She adored her husband, who in the course of his train driving was constantly unfaithful, but she hid her jealousy and Marie was her favourite daughter because she most closely resembled her engine driver. Towards the end of this rainy month Mme Guillet inherited some money from a relation in the Auvergne, and decided to give up her position of doorkeeper. They would rent an apartment like everybody else. Louise and Marie were sent to a paying school, where shopkeepers put their daughters to keep them away from the daughters of workmen and rag-and-bone dealers. Both were to learn music. Every morning Marie Guillet went off to school with a violin case and a bundle of music, her sister trotting beside her. Mme Guillet, bursting with pride, peeped through her window curtains. Marie kept close to the wall, her eyes on the ground for fear she would slip and break her precious violin. She held the case pointing downwards, so that from a distance she looked as if she had three feet. Mme Guillet had so little to do that at ten she was ready to take off her coloured turban; instead of sitting on the pavement in front of the porter's lodge, she sat by her fourth-floor window. She soon became intolerably bored. Happily Sunday compensated for the rest of the week. Marie and Louise, in their ready-made clothes, went to mass, and after lunch Marie, in front of a

music stand by the window, played the first bars of the *Berceuse de Jocelyn*, indeed played them over and over again until the whole street began to cat-call. Little Louise, younger and therefore more reasonable, would escape from her family and join us, but she was so frightened to be seen with such common children that she would only play immediately under her parents' balcony where she knew they could not see her. We who considered the whole of Clichy our playground, soon tired of this restricted space, and left her to play alone. She would watch us, forget to remain properly hidden, and be noticed by Mme Guillet, who would cry out: 'Aren't you ashamed of playing with those horrible little girls?' Then all together we would parody the first bars of the *Berceuse de Jocelyn*, and Marie would blush with hurt pride.

We froze in our lodging that autumn.

Coal was rationed. Our Protestant school had practically none, but every now and again a horse-drawn cart rumbled over the paving-stones, taking a consignment to the state schools. As soon as we heard it we flew into the street to pick up what might drop from behind. We quarrelled and fought like a cloud of starlings—those of us who had no sacks held up our aprons like a sower going out to sow. This was the grandest fun of the week, and then when I came home it was lovely to see my mother's smile when I filled her oven with beautiful coal which had cost her nothing. This matter became more important as the season advanced. Our ration was a hundredweight every so often, but we had to fetch it ourselves. The first thing to do was to hire a wheelbarrow and a sack with which we would take our place in a queue, watching the wheelbarrow with one eye and the mound of coal with the other, for it often happened that the coal ran out before our turn came to be served. When we were lucky a man with a red-flannel belt would fill our sack and help us to hoist it on the barrow. We then clattered down the avenue. We made this journey twice, once for ourselves and once for Mme Maurer, and my mother was in constant alarm that my father would discover that the coal could be fetched on a Sunday, for he would then have wanted to relieve us of this heavy work. He would, of course, have done it admirably, but with so many visits to the café that it would have doubled the price of our coal.

Mme Maurer, grateful and generous, found a charming way to say thank you. Immediately after lunch on my half-holiday



she, my mother, and I would go to the cinema in the Avenue de Clichy, where the programme included a film in several episodes, with Pearl White, and a Max Linder comedy. The programme started at two, and as soon as I heard the bell announcing the approach of the great moment my excitement was immense. Pathé Journal began with a flickering news-reel. Weary soldiers in long files marched down the lines. Lloyd George and Clemenceau danced across the screen with unbelievable speed. King George V and his good-looking son, the Prince of Wales, shook hands with soldiers and climbed over trenches and barbed wire. The cinema seemed to soak all these famous men and incidents with an oblique and incessant rain.

My mother found in these visits to the cinema her first moments of genuine pleasure. We would discuss what we had seen, thinking all the week about the next episode. A little later the great Gaumont Palace was opened in the Place Clichy. Then it was a different matter. The most famous cabaret singers in Paris were engaged to appear in the intervals, and the auditorium, full of soldiers and officers of every nation, made our hearts beat with patriotism.

One fine autumn Sunday the children in the various schools were asked by the mayor to take part in a flag day. Our flags had the effigies of Washington and La Fayette, and were mounted on coloured pins. Another girl and I were given osier baskets fastened round our necks with wide tricolour ribbon and collecting boxes with handles, so that we could shake them under the chins of passers-by. Clichy not being a suitable terrain for our activities my companion and I passed through the gate of the fortifications into Paris proper to offer our flags on the terraces of the great cafés. We came at last to the Café Wepler, with its magnificent orchestra and wide terrace crowded at this hour with allied officers, accompanied by the smartest women in Paris whose wide hats of black velvet waved and fluttered over gay faces prettily made up. All these people spoke loudly, laughed, made jokes. Their momentary pleasure was profound, visible, noisy, and generous. Silver coins poured into our boxes, and we learnt to say thank you to the English and Americans. An extremely good-looking young officer was deep in conversation with a woman who was listening to him, her elbows on the marble-topped table, her ravishing face resting between open palms, the

tips of her pointed nails lightly touching the pink lobes of her ears. I went up fascinated, shaking my box. The young officer, annoyed, fumbled in his trouser pocket, then removing his eyes unwillingly from his companion, looked for the orifice of my collecting box. The young woman, amused and curious, raised her features, tiny under the very wide hat, slowly, with an oblique movement, then cried out: 'Well, there's my little Madeleine!' and to the officer: 'Be generous, darling. This is a friend. Give her something for herself. Come, my little Madeleine, it's for you, just for you!'

The young officer amused by this soliloquy handed me a five-franc piece. Innocently I lifted my dress and slipped the coin in the pocket of the white cotton petticoat with its lace flounce, which I had begun making at Blois with Madeleine Béant, and which I was now wearing for the first time. Never had I seen Didine looking so perfectly lovely. She was in her element, a jewel in her case. Oh, how I envied her! With what ambition she filled my breast!

Tired, our baskets empty, having talked a great deal, often said thank you, my little companion and I sat down on a bench like two lovers who had walked too far through the woods on a Sunday afternoon. Our heads buzzed with life and noise. We were terribly thirsty. The way home was long and dusty. I decided to go into a café and ask the imposing wife of the owner, seated behind her high zinc counter, to give us a glass of water. She was embroidering a baby's brassière. She gave no answer to my shy request, but laying her work beside her, got up, took two glasses, and filled them with water and crème de menthe, handed them to us, and picked up her brassière again. In spite of our thirst this woman's generosity overcame us; we remained wide eyed. She now said: 'Come along, my children, drink it up and run along home. You look dead tired. And whatever you do hold tightly to your collecting boxes. They seem to me pretty full!' Refreshed we ran off, and when we reached the town hall and our boxes were opened, our takings proved the largest of any. We were given a picture of Washington and La Fayette, which I took proudly home.

I slept till lunch the next day. My mother looked rather severe when I woke up, having noticed that I had worn out my shoes. Quite apart from this she had been anxious all day, imagining

that I would be raped, strangled, or robbed. She told me that this was the last time I would go gallivanting about the place, and as she spoke she brushed my dress, folded my linen, and prepared my everyday clothes. When she took up my petticoat she discovered the five-franc piece. I had been much too tired the previous evening to talk, but now I broke into all the details, describing Didine's hat, the hats the other women wore, and at last, sighing very deeply, I asked:

'Mother, do you suppose that when I'm grown up those wide velvet hats will still be in fashion, and that they will suit me?'

My mother answered:

'Oh, a hat always ends by suiting one. It's just a question of cheating a bit—the way you do your hair, the colour of your lipstick. No, the important thing is to *have* the hat, and when one has the hat to make the men lose their heads while keeping one's own tightly fixed on one's shoulders!'

At this time of year all the children had to have their kites. We used to make them at home, and then run with them as fast as we could over the waste land under the fortifications. The boys used to arrive wearing their fathers' *képis*. A few were nice, but most of the boys had the gestures and the words of their fathers. Anybody could see they would continue in the tradition. As soon as they were married they would drink too much and pick quarrels with their wives in one-room flats with the children looking on, not understanding, afraid. Yet some girls already ran after them, resigned after marriage to serve them, and probably get a beating when the pay was spent on drink.

One could tell fairly easily what most of the boys would become—modest employees, truck drivers, or mechanics. I was gladder than ever to be a girl. It gave me a feeling of superiority. I knew in some secret way that I would have a big velvet hat like Didine's and sit one day to my heart's content on the terrace at Wepler.

Mme Maurer's son was thirty, and would have given anything to be married, but he was so timid with women that it had become a malady. As soon as a woman spoke to him he stammered and looked idiotic. But by himself at night he believed himself capable of the most atrocious things. He would have dragged a woman by the hair from her husband and cynically raped her. His bed became a veritable battle-field. His night was broken

by vivid dreams and nightmares. One wonders that by morning he was not all bumps and wounds. But once this Don Juan of dreamland stepped again into the ordinary world he would look idiotic again.

Mme Maurer, being an atheist, had refused to give him the name of a saint in the calendar. She had resorted to Homer, and called him Ulysses. This name made him suffer all through life. When he was a boy at school and was obliged to call out his surname and Christian name in front of the whole class the room went into an uproar.

Quick and muscular he might, with an English education, have overcome his troubles by being good at games. The aeroplane factory where he worked as a draughtsman mostly employed female labour, and Ulysses' purgatory was having to cross shop after shop full of women who stared at him with mockery, perversity, or fierce provocation. He felt as if he were being undressed and made to run naked before them, and when the factory became even busier, and his table was put in the middle of the assembly shop, eyes converged on him incessantly. Every morning his drawing-board was covered with notes, letters, and pictures—offers to meet him in the evening, to marry him, ribald jokes, and suggestive pictures. He would have been delighted to accept one of the rendezvous but he was afraid it might prove a joke. One woman, bolder than the others, having sworn she would get him at any price, slipped a note into his hand as he came to inspect her machine. This time he was obliged to understand. He waited for her, and she became his mistress. She was coarse and vulgar, but she gave him the happiness he needed. Meanwhile Mme Maurer, seeing him so thin, so dazed with passion, became alarmed; she had gone without things to give him a chance; she now fancied that his romance with an uneducated factory hand would end in misery. Had she not planned for him a better life than her own? Ulysses' mistress became pregnant, slipped from a ladder at the factory, and miscarried. Under pressure from his mother Ulysses abandoned his mistress but was soon unhappier than ever, for he had come under the spell of love and could no longer do without it. His nights were appalling. Soon the sight of his mother became unbearable, reminding him of his weakness in giving up the woman he needed. His filial love turned to loathing.

When my father was on a night shift my mother, Marguerite Rosier (we had now forgiven her for running away from the man with the knife), and I went to a cheap cinema in the Boulevard National, arriving half an hour before the performance started, to be sure of having the best seats.

Our cinema smelt of garlic and peppermint drops. Palm-trees stood on either side of the stage, their branches casting uneven shadows on the white screen like giant spiders. Excitedly we waited. In spite of our love for Pearl White we had not quite cured ourselves of thinking of the cinema in terms of the age-old theatre, and we had gone instinctively to the front of the stalls where, after a while, we would see appear from behind a curtain a little hunchback woman with a big white head surmounted by a number of *diamanté* spangled combs. She would slip her rheumatic knees under an upright piano and begin a Strauss waltz. The apache boys from the fortifications who were here in large numbers whistled the accompaniment, while putting an arm round the shoulder of a girl, getting into position to unbutton the blouse and fondle her breasts. These were the girls who worked for them as prostitutes on the outer zone, drawing men with alluring gestures, like Circes, near to the wall where the apache lay in waiting with his knife. All the boys wore their caps and sometimes their red scarves. A few moments later came a small dark man holding a violin case tightly under his arm, and as he made his way towards the hunchback his journey was followed by loud whistles and exclamations of 'Hurry up, maestro! You're late, brother! Let's go and sleep with his wife while he scratches a tune on his fiddle!' The fiddler, pale and without any sign of fluster, removed a black hat, placing it carefully on the edge of a chair, folded his overcoat, took up the hat which he would then place on top of the folded overcoat, and delicately brush the dandruff from his narrow shoulders. At last he opened the case, holding the violin under an arm whilst he put a handkerchief under his chin. The audience invariably cried out: 'The little old man is going to weep!' Then dolefully: 'Don't worry, daddy, you'll see her again, your girl friend!' Now at last, with a sign of his bow to the hunchback, he would begin to play. The lights would go out. The screen flickered.

By the time the big film started this chaffing audience was

settling down to the charms of Mary Pickford with her blonde curls. The love-story was getting the better of these boys and girls from the fortifications who, for all their naughtiness, were just sentimental children. At this magnificent moment, after all the fatigues of the long day, after school, after queueing, after playing in the street, exhausted, I fell fast asleep on my mother's shoulder! This happened every time we went to the cinema. Before setting out in the evening I would say: 'If I go to sleep you *will* wake me up, won't you, mother?' She promised. Indeed she did wake me, but after rubbing the sand out of my eyes and trying to unravel the plot, I fell asleep again, and my mother, transported to a land of make-believe, was far too interested in the romance to keep on pinching my arm. I would sulk on the way home, and childishly threaten to tell my father where we had been. My mother answered patiently: 'To-morrow I will describe the whole episode to you while you are sewing, and next time you really must try to keep awake!'

The 11th November: the church bells rang and Mlle Zélie, weeping with emotion, took a large flag out of a cupboard and reverently kissed it. We sang the *Marseillaise* and some hymns. A factory on the opposite side of the street let out all its workers who thronged the avenue, kissing strangers on the way, being kissed, singing, shouting. By evening the cabarets were full.

The armistice did not make any immediate difference to our lives. Women waited anxiously for the return of their husbands. Jules Alexis, who had burnt himself so cruelly so as not to be sent back to the front, was drafted to Russia. Little Louis was packed off to occupy the Rhineland. Both were relatively safe, but they were being deprived of liberty and their beloved fortifications. They would not be able to roam all night and sleep like cats all day. They did not dare complain since the eldest son had been shot as a deserter. Maimaine, matriarch, had left school. M. Alexis *père*, tired of being a widower, had found a dark woman in the early fifties, who little by little began to chastise the children, and drive Maimaine out of her position of housewife and female head of the family. We then saw these children, brought up first in the most tender love of a mother and then in the affectionate respect of an elder sister, beaten and imprisoned in the flat. My

mother and I and Mme Maurer were kept away from them. We did not even dare speak to them in the street.

By the middle of winter Mme Maurer was afraid that her son would lose his fine situation. The munition and aeroplane factories were either closing down or changing over to peacetime products. My father was fortunate enough, when his own factory closed, to be taken on by another, but night work and double pay had finished. My mother, as provident as an ant, had saved enormously, foreseeing this moment, preferring to stint us when things were easy than find herself penniless when things became difficult. Other families, less wise, were now leaving their flats to take smaller ones. Women went less often to the hairdresser.

After the Christmas holidays my mother decided to send me to the state schools. I was twelve and terribly backward, and the drastic change was at first very upsetting, but I was so very conscious of my apparent ignorance, so determined to do better than the other girls, that I began to climb higher in the class by sheer hard work. I was helped by having read enormously under Mme Maurer's guidance and having learnt closely to observe what was happening round me. Unconsciously I was being given the training of a newspaper woman. The female writer was learning her craft.

Having started fortieth out of forty girls I was eighth by the beginning of the third term. I wrote French without a mistake, which was rare even amongst highly educated women, and my reading made me so enthusiastic that by Christmas I was the second of the class. I never became the head girl. This honour, which I coveted, went to the daughter of a Spanish fruiterer, Carmen Fernandez, not at all like the Carmen of the opera, but pale, having had infantile paralysis, and still dragging one of her poor legs in a heavy apparatus. We were good enough friends out of school hours, but in the class-room we fought bitterly, she to keep her place, I trying with all my might to wrest it from her.

In February my father fell ill, coming home one evening with a burning temperature and a stitch in his side. The next morning he was unable to get out of bed. My mother and I were seized by the same malady. Not one of us could get as far as the kitchen to make a cup of coffee. We remained in this condition for three days, at the end of which Mme Maurer, becoming anxious, crossed

the road, found us in bed, and sent for the doctor. My father had congestion of the lungs; my mother and I were merely victims of the Spanish influenza then sweeping Europe. My father suffered a good deal. Spring was already visible in the warmer weather and the budding of plants and certain trees. The doctor advised my mother to take me into the little garden up the street. We would come back with cleaner air in our lungs, our eyes brighter, better able to nurse my father. After several weeks, very thin and weak, his blue army cloak over his shoulders, he walked slowly from his bed to the kitchen, his forehead cold with perspiration. He recovered, and immediately went back to work.

We had been unable during the war to obtain one of the modest allotments that had been made out of waste ground near the river. Now, suddenly, one of these became vacant. My father was deliriously happy to have his garden. He felt in a pathetic way that he was being given all the wealth of his beloved *midi*. On the first Sunday he could walk a little we crossed the Seine to visit a market gardener at Asnières, and brought back seeds and young plants. Then, as soon as my father came back from work, he hurried to his garden. He grew the finest vegetables, watered them for hours, and was so happy that our hearts melted. He built a little summer-house for his tools, and we bought a rabbit, for which he made a hutch. In front of the summer-house my father put down paving-stones and when, in the warm weather, he sat under a veranda of climbing beans, he smoked his pipe in perfect contentment. I never heard him desire another man's house or somebody else's land. The golden fleece would not have pleased him better than the tender lettuce or the green peas he brought home in the evening.

I was now desperately anxious to pass school certificate. Every month our mistress, Mlle Foucher, gave us increasingly difficult tests. Mathematics gave me serious trouble, and so, in some ways, did geography. Distant countries did not interest me. I could not imagine the English and the Americans anywhere else but at Wepler's or on the roundabouts in the Place Clichy. I do not believe it struck me that there could be American *women*, except, of course, Mary Pickford and Mabel Normand.

I was up at five to go over my homework, and at this hour the kitchen table was my own. At eight I made my own breakfast,



and went to school. Mlle Foucher encouraged me. Of Alsatian descent, she was ardently patriotic, of rare intelligence and humanity. Her lessons acquired polish and extreme simplicity. Young, pretty, elegant, always beautifully shod, she seemed to dress for us. This combination of beauty and intelligence has ever seemed to me the most desirable thing on earth. When on arrival she took off her coat or her jacket, according to the time of year, and stood before us in her blouse—rose or blue or white—we would glance at one another with appreciative winks; then during recreation we would say: ‘Personally I like to see her in pink!’ ‘Oh, no, she’s far better in blue!’ She was ours. We loved her. Her hair prettily done, her cheeks slightly pale but with dark, deep eyes contrasting with their pallor, she had a personality of her own. Her smile was shrewd and a trifle surprised when one of us passed a clever remark or one that came from the very depths of our childish experience. She loved to draw and make us illustrate our prose: I used to make tiny pen and ink sketches that delighted her.

The school certificate was in July and took place in another school at the far end of Clichy, a large cool room whose windows, wide open, overlooked a courtyard. As we were on the first floor the higher branches of the chestnut-trees were level with our faces. Starlings and sparrows hopped from green branch to green branch as if to mock us, we who were locked up in our big cage smelling of disinfectant and ink. Sheets of paper were handed round. Dictation, parsing, French history, and then off we went without appetite to lunch. The afternoon passed heavily, the sun being very hot. Even the sparrows had lost some of their energy. We were with girls from other schools. Marie Guillet, more than a year my senior, was almost next to me, pale, lips tightly closed, looking quite miserable. At the far end of the room sat Carmen Fernandez, magnificently cool and unmoved. A curious jealousy rose within me, a desire to become a woman of importance. Pride and ambition took hold of me. Even if I failed in my examination, yet would I outshine with my prose. Heroines flared my path. George Sand, for instance. If only I could be a famous woman writer; but even as this idea took shape, I decided that it must not interfere with my having a wide velvet hat like Didine, or of being pretty like her, or of being clever with my needle or with the iron. All

these were perhaps quite normal dreams for a little girl; only in my case poverty became the driving power to give them substance. I fought like a she-wolf to make them come true. At four we were let out, and the next day we went to school as usual while waiting to be examined orally. We repeated feverishly historical dates, the rivers of France, and the capitals of Europe which politicians were just then so busy meddling with for no better reason than to confuse children who were due to sit for their examinations the following year. We would soon be bidding farewell to Montenegro—capital Montenegro; Turkey—capital Constantinople. Good-bye brave little Serbia and glorious Petrograd of the Russia of the czars, of the czarina, and of those grand duchesses so much admired by Mme Maurer. The tragedy of Ekaterinburg was slipping into history with that of Louis XVI and of my dear Marie-Antoinette, and with the martyrdom of Charles I of England. We crammed dates. Tragedies, battles, and glorious happenings were marshalled to satisfy an examiner who would probably be thinking merely of the heat and the tiresomeness of little girls.

My mother was worried about my health. The strain of the last months was bringing new paleness to my cheeks, my eyes were not good, I was insufficiently fed, and my lungs were in need of pure air. Neither she nor my father emitted any great desire to have their daughter distinguish herself academically. For my part I had not worked to please anybody but myself, being by nature suspicious of compliments, just as later my head was seldom turned when men said that I was pretty. The force to succeed grew within me, beyond my control, and often my gaiety was tempered with envy and discontent so that, never satisfied, I was thrust further and further forward.

One Monday morning our headmistress entered the class-room. We all got up, and Mlle Foucher, rising also, offered her seat. The headmistress opened her spectacle case, and before putting on her pince-nez held them between forefinger and thumb whilst examining our ranks, her eyes occasionally resting with particular interest on one or other of us. When she had made us suffer several moments of this torture she adjusted her pince-nez, coughed like Sarah Bernhardt, and unfolded her list. Only eight of us had passed. When I heard my name a great inward satisfaction made me blush. Many who had failed wept, some

with their faces hidden in their arms, bent over their desks. I did not hurry to go home and announce the news to my parents, being first anxious to savour it myself. To my surprise my mother was peeping behind the curtains, waiting to see me come along the street. She must have guessed from my face that I had passed, for she opened the door, kissed me, and that was all. My father's pleasure was touchingly meridional. He wept! Marie Guillet's name was not on the list. Her mother said she must now concentrate on her music, and a woman came to teach her the violin.

In Marguerite Rosier's house, on the second floor in a small flat like ours, lived Mme Gontrel, a tall woman with a big head, ugly, and yet so amiable that one quickly forgot her ungainliness, charmed by her voice. Mme Gontrel had a daughter of six called Dédée, dark and little, like an ant, jumping up and down, fast on her legs—one saw her everywhere at almost the same moment, in a queue outside the milk shop, buying a loaf of freshly baked bread. Mme Gontrel's second child was a boy aged two, whose over-sized head leaned to one side, an abnormal child, who never spoke and hardly moved. Henri, or Riri, was always in his mother's arms. Her body was quite deformed from carrying him, and she looked like a lanky tree with an extra branch grafted to it. She went to market, returned laden with provisions (and, of course, Riri), always in excellent good humour. My mother used to see her talking to Marguerite Rosier and another neighbour whom we used to call 'Mother Newspaper' because she never stopped talking. As Mother Newspaper's husband worked in a bank like Hyacinthe she was alone all day. Her gossiping had to be done in the open air. The market was her favourite tribune, and when she could catch hold of one of these ladies she did not let them go in a hurry, having limitless stories to tell. Tall and pale, leaning slightly as if bent by the wind, she must have been sixty. She was dressed in greyish black and nobody had ever been to her flat.

I see her very clearly even now, her elongated features shining like wax, a great many tortoiseshell combs stuck fanwise in her bun, a high-necked collar garnished with jade, and a cameo representing a beautiful gazelle encircled with small pearls, of which quite a number were missing. One day, when I was

examining the cameo instead of listening to what she was telling my mother, she said:

‘I see that you are interested in my cameo, little girl. It is quite a favourite, and I want to be buried with it. That’s what I told my husband,’ she continued, turning from me to my mother. ‘You understand, Mme Gal, that I have made all my arrangements, and taken the necessary precautions, for my husband being twenty years younger I must be ready to leave him at any moment. We often talk about it, and I practically live from day to day. For instance, what I wash in the morning I iron the same evening. I do the mending and tidy the house as if I were on the point of leaving for a journey.’ Then looking down at me again with a twist of her neck, which made her resemble a giraffe moving from leaf to leaf, she continued: ‘This cameo is the only jewel, other than my wedding ring, that I have ever owned. I bought it in London, in the French quarter of Soho, during the reign of Edward VII. I had gone to England with my first husband, and as he was busy all day I wandered alone through the streets of London, for hours on end, never tired. A magnificent town, Mme Gal! And how wonderfully paved! A real pleasure to the feet! Oh, and another thing! Nobody ever asks any questions. You have your key in your bag, and there’s no *concierge*, no doorkeeper. I lived three years in London. My husband and I used to go to the theatre; never have I seen such lovely diamonds and pearls! Quite the finest in the world. And some of the ladies had diamond buckles on their shoes worn with the most natural grace, as if it were no surprise to them to have such elegance and wealth; and indeed, is it not true that they have been accustomed for generations to their fortunes? They are not nearly so placid as they are supposed to be. They laugh loudly at the theatre, and are quickly enthusiastic. My husband and I were very quiet in comparison. Of course I was sometimes jealous of the jewellery, and it was after one of these evenings at the theatre that I took it into my head to have something really fine. This was the result. My cameo was really most beautiful. The pearls were all of the same size, and if ever I lost one it was immediately replaced; but now when I take it off I look to see if there is not a new hole, and that is very easy to tell, for when a pearl is newly fallen out it leaves a bright cavity which soon grows dim like the

others. There are only two or three left now, and I have a feeling that when I am down to my last pearl I shall do my last wash, iron my last sheets, and mend my clothes for the last time. Little Madeleine, I am merely a sentimental old gossip, as ugly as a scarecrow, who ought to disappear, but who would like to remain invisible, helping with what remains of her strength the man she loves with a heart that never grows old. Good-bye, little Madeleine; good-bye, Mme Gal. I am juggling a hare for supper to-night. Good-bye!

We were very intrigued by these confidences, for Mother Newspaper had never told us that she had been twice married or that she had lived so long in London. What she told us was never dull, but this time, instead of us leaving her, she had left us, and we would have liked some more.

Once a week we received a letter from my Aunt Marguerite. She sent us some lengths of pretty cotton out of which my mother made me dresses and aprons. At Christmas we had a plum pudding, but as we did not know that it had to be cooked we found it indigestible and threw it away in my father's allotment, where all the birds in Clichy were soon enjoying an English Christmas dinner. They had been quicker than we to realize its potentialities!

This summer my mother sent me again to Ver-sur-Mer. In fact I had become so thin and anaemic that I was sent before the end of term, which was disappointing. My schooldays were now over. In October I would have to find work.

For a few weeks, however, on my return from the country, I took possession again of the street. Maimaine and Henriette had grown-up work to do. Hélène, though younger than I, came occasionally, but she also was required at home. The boys already wore long trousers and followed their elders to the various factories. There remained Louise and Marie Guillet, and Dédée Gontrel, who hopped from pavement to pavement like a canary in a cage. Dédée was great fun, her twittering was bright and clever: she came to us and I went to her. Mme Gontrel continued to carry Riri, who was very good, but so ugly that nobody but his mother would kiss him. Dédée, who in spite of this loved him dearly, would occasionally rub his poor slobbering cheek with hers, pretending to kiss him. As for me, I kissed him in the name of Jesus, inspired by these words written

in large letters on a wall of our Sunday school: 'Jesus loves little children.' I kissed Riri with all my heart, and I was sorry that our Saviour was not amongst us in the flesh so that I could have taken Riri to Him to be cured. One day, more than usually moved by this desire, I mentioned it to his mother, who looked at me with such immense surprise that I was quite disconcerted. Very occasionally Mme Gontrel would put down her little son. Dédée and I would then play at the lost child. Riri was placed at the foot of a chair. Dédée and I, two ladies out walking, would find him, give him another name, and bring him up. At this point Mme Gontrel would arrive, clasp him to her bosom, cover him with kisses, and give a little tap to his overgrown head so that it took the right angle against her shoulder. Riri, happy, would suck his thumb.

Towards six the family went to the windows of the flat to look up the street. The kitchen window was occupied by Mme Gontrel and Riri; the one in the bedroom by Dédée and, if I happened to be with them, by me. Sometimes we waited for as long as an hour, and then suddenly Riri would show signs of life, making the strangest contortions, and there would appear from the corner of the rue Souchal a dark little man wearing a frock coat with a magpie tail, a soiled white waistcoat, and a black hat. This curious little man held a black violin case, as black as his coat and hat, in one hand, and in the other, by the string, a toy balloon, which would float a yard or two above his hat, or sometimes, in the place of this, he would carry a coloured windmill in celluloid.

This was M. Gontrel.

As soon as he had turned the corner of the rue Souchal he planted himself firmly on both feet, raised his head so that one could see the Adam's apple floating in his thin neck, and began:

'Good day to the prettiest woman, to Riri the cleverest child, to Dédée the famous dancer, and'—this was addressed to me—'to the little blonde girl!'

Having finished this welcome he advanced a few yards, looking sharply to right and to left, and if by chance a *concierge* or a tenant leaning out of a window dared to laugh at him, he would emit like fire from his mouth the most foul invectives and menaces it is possible to imagine. Those who received these burning addresses, as if scorched, withdrew their heads into their houses like snails. Then he, victorious, his coloured balloon bobbing

up and down above the crown of his black hat, or the windmill turning in the breeze, would continue his way. As he passed the doorkeeper's lodge one would hear him cry: 'Good day, Mme Machin, are you still cuckold?' The poor woman retreated into the depths of her kitchen, not daring to show her head till he was on the stairs. At last he arrived, having bumped up against several steps which he insulted as if they had been responsible people, entered, kissed his wife, saying: 'Heavens! How awful you look, even worse than yesterday!' He kissed Riri. 'Well, there you are, poor brat, take your balloon!' Looking at Dédée, a curious tone of affection would creep into his voice: 'You're as ugly as an ant, but you'll turn into something good. I know it. I know it. You'll be everything I haven't been.' Riri laughed almost intelligently. M. Gontrel sat in the kitchen, took off his boots, plunged his thin feet into a tub of cold water, and, fully dressed, laid himself on the bed, where he was soon fast asleep. His wife waited, listened, smacked Dédée to keep her quiet, then crept to the bed where, with the expertness of a professional, she picked his pockets, taking the larger silver and a few notes. Crossing the room on tiptoe she placed these in an enamel box marked 'Kitchen Salt,' and putting Dédée and Riri to bed, went back to her place at the window, where she would remain till night fell and the lamp-lighter lit the street lamps. She would now wake her husband and prepare some black coffee, which they would both drink. She knelt to lace his shoes. He fumbled in his pockets and gave her the small change. Then putting a white scarf round his neck he would take his violin case from where it reposed on the kitchen table and bump down the stairs. Before turning into the rue Souchal he would stop, take off his hat, bow like a Spanish grandee, and exclaim: 'Good night to the woman I love, and may all those who are peeping at me behind their curtains be bitten by fleas!' He would be gone the next moment, and the street would again become silent.

M. Gontrel played the violin in front of the terraces of the Montmartre cafés. When dawn whitened the fortifications he would be on the way home, but often, stupid with absinthe and fatigue, he lay on a bench, and there he would sleep clutching his black violin case against his poor narrow chest like a girl mother with the baby she cannot abandon, till wakened by cold or rain.

THE weather had been very hot and Riri looked more pitiful than ever. Mme Gontrel suggested going to the Bois de Boulogne and eating sandwiches on the grass. My mother gave me permission to accompany her, and we took the underground to the Étoile, where I thought of Marie-Thérèse and Rolande, wondering what had become of them since my father had sent them away from the house. Mme Gontrel led us up a fine avenue full of rich modern apartment houses, and stopping in front of one of these she knocked at the *concierge's* glass door and whispered something I did not catch. We passed into the pretty gravelled courtyard, Dédée making me a sign that I must hide with her behind a shrub. Suddenly Mme Gontrel began to sing, first rather timidly, but soon her voice, warmed by the love-theme of the waltz, became natural, and swelling out revealed all its purity and strength. Windows were opened, heads put out. The singer with the child in her arms became focused like an actress on a stage. The heads were withdrawn, and a moment later, as the song ended on a last tender note of love, pieces of silver rained on the gravel. Dédée sprang from our hiding-place, ran from coin to coin, lightly plucked those which had fallen behind a piece of netting, into a pail, or behind the shrubbery, filling her apron like a sprightly elf. Mme Gontrel meanwhile bowed, thanked her audience, kissed Riri as a gesture of maternal love, and plunging a hand into Dédée's outstretched apron, withdrew the silver, which she weighed expertly, selecting half a dozen coins which she dropped on the *concierge's* doormat as we passed, crying out: 'Good-bye, madame, I shall look forward to seeing you next week.'

We repeated this profitable experience in another block further along the avenue, but Mme Gontrel again left the place hurriedly for fear of the police, street singing not being allowed by law. On the grass overlooking the lake in the Bois de Boulogne we



ate like happy people. Riri crawled over the daisies, while Mme Gontrel counted her money and made plans for the future.

As these were my last holidays my mother thought I should make myself useful. She had built up quite a fine dressmaking business, and now sent me into the heart of Paris, to the Magasin du Printemps, or to the Galeries Lafayette, to match a material or to buy trimmings or buttons.

I set off proudly all alone, extremely frightened. I had made the journey many times with my parents, especially my mother, but on this occasion it seemed longer. In the dim openings of carriage doors, leaning flat against walls, young apaches, their eyes mocking, their teeth white, gave me the uncomfortable feeling of resembling Red Riding Hood watched by the wolf. I walked briskly, then in a sudden panic ran, but a moment later, ashamed of my cowardice, walked again. Turning into the boulevard I now had to pass in front of a long line of women drawn up gossiping, knitting on kitchen chairs, taking the air, commenting on passers-by. Turning sharply left there was a street with a high wall. Behind this wall was the cemetery of the Batignolles, one of the richest in Paris, where families owned the land for ever. My childish person cast an elongated shadow across the stone wall preceding me fantastically. Suddenly a long funeral procession came into view, and passed through the great double doors, the wheels of the hearse grating against the fine gravel of well-tended path wending ahead between graves. Quickly I tried to look into this jealously kept city of the dead. The doors closed in my face. Even now I could hear, though less loudly, the grind of the wheels and the tread of the mourners walking behind. Then silence. From here I turned into a street exclusively occupied by florists, admiring magnificent flowers in warm earthenware pots arranged on shelves like spectators on the tiers of a circus. At the far end tall stelae of rose, grey, and black marble, not yet carved, virginal, patiently waited for the customer who was bound to come, some leaning casually against vaults so beflowered, cool, and well polished that they appeared almost desirable to inhabit. The street smelt of wet flowers, flowers cut down in the full vigour of living—death, in short. I shuddered, but nothing would have persuaded me to take another route. In the evening on my way home the shops were closed by open-mesh steel gates so that the flowers

would have air. The employees, having lived in the proximity of a cemetery all day, had doubtless returned to the heart of Paris seeking nocturnal gaiety. Paul Verlaine, sad and tormented poet, is buried here.

My mother remained during the time of my absence in great agitation. My only adventures were to be chased from counter to counter by vicious old gentlemen, to be pinched and fingered rather too often in the crowds of the underground. I became used to this, and the nausea brought on the first few times by these sneaking and not altogether flattering attacks quickly subsided. Paris is thus. Life was beginning. A young woman develops her own defences, but clearly the days of playing on the pavements were finished. I was to know the joys of growing up, the satisfaction of seeing men turn round in the street to take a second look at me.

Mother Newspaper had not been to market for several days. Marguerite Rosier thought this curious, and went to knock on the door of her flat, but there was no answer. The husband came in from his bank in the evening, but as Marguerite had never spoken to him she lacked the courage to ask him for news of his wife. The next morning the husband went off as usual, but in the evening he came back with another man, and the next day, just as Marguerite was going off to market, she heard heavy footsteps and a banging on the stairs, and leaning over the banisters she saw two men bringing up a coffin. They came right up to her landing and then stopped. Mother Newspaper's door opened, and the husband, coming out, made a sign to the men to come in. During the afternoon a hearse arrived at the house. The coffin was brought down, and the street, to its stupefaction, saw the husband emerge all in black and follow the hearse quite alone. Nobody had been told—there were no mourners, no flowers. Burying somebody in such a secret, un-neighbourly way had no precedent. Mother Newspaper had told us she had taken her precautions, but these were of a nature to shock us profoundly. I did not sleep all night, dreaming of the cameo brooch, wondering if the last pearl had fallen out, if the poor gazelle was now under the earth. Had she done her last washing, her last ironing, her final mending? Her waxen face haunted me for many days in the market. I kept on seeing her in imagination with her long grey-black clothes, her bun with

the tortoiseshell combs. We had laughed a good deal at her expense; but we missed her now, and as I hurried along the pavement, keeping close in to the houses, I would seemingly recognize the peculiar smell of her black clothes when the sun used to scorch them.

My clergyman, back from the war, found me my first job.

Two Protestant Dutchmen owned a new white factory on the Boulevard de la Révolte, where they made imitation pearls which were just then coming so much into fashion.

This boulevard encircled Paris on its outer perimeter, was paved with great stones as in the days of the French kings, and along the side of it, on slightly higher ground, ran a little tram-car which made a tremendous noise as it went slowly along. I could catch this tram-car opposite the public wash-house, and it took me almost to the door of the factory.

I learnt to classify correspondence, and to run quickly on errands through the ranks of women dipping the pearls, bending over tiny cauldrons in which the pearls bubbled in fish scales to make them smooth and rosy as the dawn. In the private office of the Dutch partners there was a picture of Saskia, Rembrandt's wife, after whom our factory was named. I looked at it with interest and pleasure. The idea of luxury entered my mind and I was soon dreaming of real pearls (not artificial ones) to wear against my blonde skin.

The main office was full of cashiers, who came from Paris. My mother packed my lunch in a napkin, and a young cashier and I lunched together, and with the hour left to us climbed the fortifications in the hope of finding some flowers. We never found any. The grass grew tough and high, always inclined to the east or to the north according to the prevailing wind. When the breeze came from across Paris we liked to feel it against our cheeks, blowing through our hair as if bringing us the million sensations of a great city. We heard the hooter of our factory and the hooters of other factories. We would get up like two children from our seats on the grass and return rather sadly to work.

In the evening I would say good night to my companion of the lunch hour and join Mlle Augustine and Mlle Pannier. Mlle Augustine lived in a block of flats behind the Gouin Hospital. I used to wait for her in the morning. She was a religious girl

with a pretty skin, fresh and rosy, and eyes of such a shallow blue that they gave one the impression of having been washed. A huge bun, the colour of a cow's tail, respectfully plaited, spoiled by its too great size the effect of her wide-brimmed hats. Her hats were of an honest grey in winter, of light straw in summer. Both her parents worked in a chocolate factory. She was eighteen, dispassionate, went to church, and represented her family's ambition to make of their daughter an educated girl employed in an office.

Mlle Pannier was thirty. Small brunette with large black eyes, sallow cheeks, a skin that was losing its freshness because of a too long virginity, half consumed by envy and rancour because she was still without a husband, she waited but had less and less hope. Dressed in a tailor-made with a long jacket and a cherry-coloured velvet toque, the collars of her white blouses always speckless and of pretty form, she was still a most desirable person—eyes full of promise, burning with sensuality, but overbrimming with scruples and honesty, quite determined not to do what she shouldn't till the ring was on her finger. She lived in the Place de la Mairie with a brother, who, like her, was longing to marry, but could not find a worthy enough partner. On summer evenings they walked together like husband and wife, or leant out of their balcony, elbow to elbow, looking at the people in the square. She stayed at home on Saturdays and told us on Mondays how many marriages she had counted at the town hall, and she described exactly what each bride wore as she angrily hit the keys of her typewriter: 'Sir, we thank you for your letter of the 16th inst. . . .' Then, tearing out the paper with a quick, dry movement, she would say to Mlle Augustine:

'You see little Madeleine there? Well, she's just the type to get easily married. Gay! That's what she is! And as she doesn't give marriage a thought she'll get it offered to her all day long.'

A new sheet of paper went into the typewriter, and she continued:

'I think of nothing else. I dream marriage, breathe marriage, and when a man talks to me, it doesn't matter what I answer, he sees right off that I'm thinking of marriage, and he drops me like a hot brick. I suppose it shows.'

When she had done a paragraph or two at great speed she would stop, rest her elbows on the desk, and say:

'For two years I've been in this office, and next door'—she nodded in the direction of a glass partition dividing the typists from the accountants—'next door, I tell you, Mlle Augustine, except for M. Binche, who is not at all young, not a single one of those men was married when I first came here. Since then every Monday morning or Friday evening, one by one, they have come here to say: "To-morrow, Mlle Pannier, I am going to be married," or "You know, Mlle Pannier, I was married on Saturday." And yet I was here, right next door to them, just as pretty as the women they married. Not one, not a single lone one who ever thought I might make him happy! Mlle Pannier is my name, and it's only too clear that Mlle Edith Pannier I shall remain. Consider that even during the war, when everybody found a husband, I was left high and dry. Yet they say I'm pretty, that there's life in my eyes. The other women are envious of my hair, but they would not want it!' She turned to me. 'Quick, Madeleine, give me the file of the *Printemps* at Marseilles! And you see, Mlle Augustine, with my brother it's the same thing. Unlucky! That's what we are! If only we could find another flat, one where we don't have to watch the marriages!'

I was in my fifteenth year, slim, almost dangerously, my magnificent blonde hair, according to the rules, caught up in a bun, so that I looked all head. A boy of seventeen, draughtsman in the gas company which the Dutch brothers owned further along the boulevard, was already courting me. He lunched quickly in the canteen, and came to walk with my friend Georgette and me along the fortifications. On our return, his good-bye drowned in the noise of the hooter, he would blow me, without shame, without fear of what anybody might say or think, a kiss with the tips of his fingers to which I would reply in the same way, laughing hilariously. One day when the noise of the hooter subsided I heard Mlle Pannier's voice in the office: 'Just look at that, Mlle Augustine, the very boy I had my eyes on! I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't come to me on Friday and say he's going to marry our little Madeleine.'

At the end of the month I brought home one hundred francs, and I once again witnessed my father in his more touching moments. He cried with happiness, saying that we were as lucky as millionaires. A few days later, in a tombola, I won a very large coffee-pot, made of some light metal, presumably tin.

My mother to please me immediately made some coffee in it. We all found it excellent, but my father, looking enviously at the pot, said: 'It would make a magnificent watering-can for my allotment; the filter would produce a fine rain! I wouldn't dare buy anything half so good. Do please give it me, Madelon.'

To celebrate the event we shuffled the cards for bezique, my father, after each game, marking the scores on the wall, and my mother pouring out a fresh round, the supply of coffee seemingly endless. My mother played cards indifferently, and she and I nearly always lost, but later in the evening I improved so much that I beat my father, and he said:

'It's funny the way one's children always catch up with one, and then seem to do better; but what good does that do them? In the end they come back to where their parents left off.'

'You're not where *your* parents left off!' cut in my mother bitterly. 'At least *they* had a house of their own, whilst we are still in this miserable lodging!'

My father, the joy driven out of him, shook his head and went off to undress. Our evening ended sadly, and the disenchantment that never left my mother enveloped us like a damp fog.

After a few months at the pearl factory I began to have serious indigestion. There were too many things against me. I was in the middle of growing up, I did not eat nearly enough, and the journey was tiring. One morning, when it was raining, the little tram-car which clanged forward on its own elevated path along the boulevard went beyond my pearl factory before I emerged from my usual day-dream. Almost as soon as I had made this tiresome discovery the factory hooters all began going, and I was filled with that absurd panic which young people have when they realize they are late for work. I jumped off the tram while it was still rattling along. I did not of course take into account the difference in level between the track and the paved highway. Rolling over, my bag and my small parcel of sandwiches scattered, I remained unconscious for a moment or two in the ditch.

This accident, which shook me considerably, brought on new attacks of indigestion. That morning I was not at all well, and Mlle Augustine brought me home, where my mother put me to bed. I became delirious, battled with an imaginary tram-car, and ran a high temperature. Two days later, however, I was back at work, though I refused to take the tram.

Mlle Pannier advised me to learn shorthand. She and Mlle Augustine liked to argue about the merits of their different systems. My mother agreed that I had no hope of becoming a secretary without an adequate training, and I therefore, at my own expense, attended night classes in the Place de la Mairie.

Mme Duville, a former shorthand-typist, had opened this little school to take advantage of a sudden desire on the part of factory girls and even seamstresses to 'better themselves' by working in an office. After a quick supper at home I attended night class till ten, and the next day, instead of climbing over the fortifications with Georgette and our young man from the gas company, alone in the office I practised assiduously.

Meanwhile the business recession was gathering momentum and turning into the short but vicious slump which followed the spending of war bonuses. Factories everywhere were closing down. The Dutch brothers dismissed a large part of their staff, and after only five months with them I found myself again at home. Accordingly I went more often to Mme Duville, where, at last, I was making a little progress.

In a large room full of chairs and tiny tables women and men of every age wrote hieroglyphics, typed on large machines, read aloud, or grouped themselves round Mme Duville, who, a great silver watch in her hand, rolling her r's with a thick Bourguignon accent, dictated acts of sale from some notary's office, leading articles from the newspapers, or the incomprehensible speeches of members of Parliament. When Mme Duville had finished she would cry out theatrically: 'How many of you have followed without missing a word?' Few put up their hands. Then she would announce with a doctoral air: 'That was seventy to the minute. Go to your machines now and start typing.'

M. Duville was employed at the town hall, where he kept the register of deaths. He was gentle, dressed entirely in black as befitted his occupation, and helped his wife in the evenings. One would then see, and hear, two opposing groups, that of M. Duville: 'Those of you who have followed me without missing a single word have done sixty to the minute,' and his wife, beautifully marcelled, her large head seemingly neckless, so solidly was it fixed upon her shoulders, dictating with obvious relish a peroration of M. Herriot.

Spring was coming along. On Saturdays I also would watch

the wedding parties driving up to the town hall, many of them in open carts with long benches facing each other which, in France, are called *tapissières*, the bride, all in white with her veil, being helped down by gentlemen with well-oiled hair and white buttonholes. Often after leaving the town hall the procession would walk to the adjoining church of St. Vincent-de-Paul for the religious ceremony. The decorated carts waited, drawn up in rows, in the square. The various parties often fraternized and went together for a drive round the Bois de Boulogne before the wedding breakfast and the ball.

Up against the railway embankment of the *ceinture*, the line which encircles Paris like the fortifications, was a little café where my father went to play cards on Saturday night. This café was owned by Louis Duparc, whose wife, Louise, my mother and I had got to know at the public wash-house when we lived in the rue Kloch. Daughter of honest folk, of very poor health, she had a son of six and tenderly loved her husband. A few months earlier she had nearly died from a miscarriage, and my mother had got into the habit of helping her with the housework. From her first-floor bedroom window one could see the trains go by. Innumerable goods trains, night and day, shook her bed and prevented her from getting to sleep. She was in despair, saying that she would never be strong again. Louis filled his bottles of wine, served his customers behind the zinc counter, tried to cook something appetizing for his wife, bringing it up to her when he had a moment to spare. When she saw him come in she would say: 'My poor Louis, I shall never recover. These trains are killing me.' They were obliged to send their son to a grandmother at Angers, and it broke their hearts, for they all loved each other. Thus the boy was at Angers, Louis was in his cellar or serving his customers, and she, shaken by the goods trains and their strident whistles, shaken also by a dry cough that never left her, was alone in her room. The doctor moved his head in a way which left no doubt, and spoke about the chest being weak. He would then look at Louis and say: 'As for you, you're more seriously ill than she is. You ought both to throw all this up and go to live in the country! Soon it will be too late. But you won't understand.' Louis looked at the doctor and answered:

'Understand? But that is what is going to make us die, understanding that it's too late!'



'Come now!' said the doctor in a kindly tone. 'You are both still young and, I may say, both intelligent and reasonable. Only, I must warn you, no more miscarriages or it will be the end.'

Thus on Saturday nights I would go to fetch my father here after his game of cards. If he was not quite ready I would go up to see Louise, talking to her a little, watching the heavy trains go past. She would remain motionless, her thin arms stretched out beside her enfeebled body, her eyes looking at me sadly.

My father and I would return home together, and the next morning, being Sunday and in March, he would go off to his garden, having bought some manure in anticipation of a good morning's digging. He did not come back till I was leaving for Sunday school, and exclaimed: 'How lovely you've become, Madelon! But oh my, what a hat!'

'For all *you* know about hats!' I exclaimed, holding this one in both hands to prevent it from being blown off my head. Besides, now that my hair was done up like a lady I was not against giving myself a few airs. In the evening my father went round to play cards with his friends and to 'help poor Louis.' My mother and I sewed and then made supper.

On this particular Sunday the table was laid and the soup was gently simmering. My father was very late. Eight struck at the state schools, then the quarter and the half. We were anxious. In a few moments my mother would send me to look for him. I would have to leave my favourite corner between the laid table and the sideboard, vacating the broken chair on which I was so comfortable. The sideboard had followed us everywhere, originally painted white, now battered and scratched. My little brother had once hidden in it with the grey cat, finishing between them a stolen leg of mutton. My mother and I used to stand on the broken chair to put pennies in the gas meter.

I was slipping on my shoes when I heard a noise on the stairs, and after a moment of apparent hesitation the bell rang. I was already there, and opened quickly. My father, supported by Louis Duparc, had obviously had trouble in getting up the stairs. Louis Duparc explained in the nicest way that as my father had not felt well in the café he had not wanted to let him come home alone. 'But I must run,' he added, shaking my mother by the hand, 'for I've left the café with nobody to look after it. I

told the customers I wouldn't be long. They won't take advantage of me.' Then, in a confidential tone to my mother: 'Louise isn't at all well. She seems to be getting weaker all the time and calls out for our son. It's no good the mother-in-law going to see her. She comes to the café, does her best to be brave, but when she hears Louise coughing she cries and cries. She cries so much she puts us both in a worse state. As a matter of fact my wife doesn't know her mother is here this time. Only when I take her meals up on a tray she's surprised to find all sorts of little dishes she used to like when she was a child. She wonders how I've the time or the patience to make them. She says: "How you must love me, Louis! And how I love you!"'

Poor Louis, as he stood in the doorway speaking, cried gently, as a man cries, not being accustomed to tears.

My mother said to him: 'Poor Louis, be brave. I'll come and see Louise to-morrow. Go back quickly, and thank you for what you've just done!'

He ran down the stairs and was gone.

My father was sitting on a chair laughing gently to himself. His thoughts were far away, his knees were wide apart; on one of them rested an elbow, a clenched fist supported the chin. Suddenly realizing where he was, he said: 'You know, Matilda, it beats me. I'll swear I had the ace of clubs!'

'You've a tidy bit more than the ace of clubs!' answered my mother. 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself!'

'Oh, please, Matilda, don't be angry! I hardly had anything to drink.'

'Well, have something to eat,' answered my mother.

'No,' he objected wearily, 'it would be no good. I'm not hungry.'

Emerging from my seat between the table and the sideboard I said: 'Mother, why don't you give father some warm water? It's so horrible it would make him sick and he might feel better.'

At the thought of warm water my father broke into peals of laughter. He brought his hands loudly to his knees, crying: 'Warm water for me, for *me*! What do you know about that? My own daughter telling me I ought to drink warm water! Matilda, did you hear that? *Peccavi*, warm water for Milou! Well, if that doesn't beat everything!'

'But, father, it was to do you good!'

'Keep quiet, naughty girl!' he exclaimed, his eyes now full of tears. He had laughed so much that he had difficulty in speaking. 'Are you really my daughter that you can offer me water—and warm water at that?'

We could do nothing with him that evening. He would drink nothing, not even the soup that was filling the kitchen with its homely smell. My mother put him to bed, and he was soon asleep. Then she came into the kitchen, and we ate silently, but after a while she said, as if in continuation of her own thoughts: 'The trouble is that to-morrow he will be really ill. Every holiday now is followed by a day of illness. His strength is leaving him, and the day will come when he won't be able to work any more, and then where shall we be?'

She continued thinking by herself, I expect, for soon she said:

'You don't really know how to do anything, do you? And as for me, my dressmaking scarcely does more than pay for the rent and the shoes.'

She pushed her plate away, and suddenly asked me for a page of my shorthand note-book and a pen. Then in her neat hand she wrote to her sister Marguerite in England, imploring her to do something for me.

'Probably,' she wrote, 'I shall have to look after my husband for years to come. I would do anything for my daughter not to share this martyrdom.'

My mother must have been in real despair to go to her sister for help. It must have hurt her pride terribly. She was pale. Her golden helmet shone under the electric light bulb. She sealed the envelope, and fetching one of Marguerite's letters, copied the address, spelling out each word, drawing such a heavy line underneath that she scratched the paper. She gave me the impression of having signed her death warrant. She opened her purse, took out a blue stamp, and stuck it on the letter, saying:

'Keep your slippers on. Run and post this in the box at the corner of the Place de la République. I'll be looking out for you at the window. Don't make a sound on the stairs. We must post this letter immediately, for if I found it to-morrow morning I'd be ashamed to ask the help of your Aunt Marguerite and her husband, whom I don't even know, and I should tear it up.

Run along quickly, and as soon as you're back we'll go to bed.'

I tore down as lightly as on wings, and running as far as the square, raised myself on tiptoe to slip the letter into the box. Then I took one foot off the ground, thinking it must be wonderful to dance in a ballet. I heard the letter drop amongst the others. The sound made me smile, not guessing that what my mother had just done would change my destiny.

My father went to work as usual but, as my mother had feared, he was ill, and when he came home in the evening we were overcome with pity for his pale cheeks and his worn-out features, which seemed to beg our forgiveness and affection. He went to bed very early and read a newspaper. To our immense surprise he even started a serial. He would buy the *Excelsior* on his way to work, and bring it back to us, having read it during his lunch hour, folded neatly to fit into his pocket. My mother used to dictate the short story so that I could practise my shorthand. There were some magnificent ones by Frédéric Boutet, Pierre Mille, and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, whose stories of her beloved Normandy rank to-day amongst the finest in French literature. *L'Enfant au coq* and *Graine au vent* are novels that sit always in the bookshelf at my elbow.

We went to see Louise.

Spring was tormenting her, filling her alternatively with hope and despair. Sparrows chirruped on the railway lines, joyfully, lungs clear and free, supple and alert. I sat at a marble-topped table in the café, against a leather-upholstered bench. Louis was cleaning his zinc counter, wiping and setting down bottles of varied drink which he kept close at hand to tempt his customers. Yellow, green, and red aperitifs glistened. Louis, between rumblings of the trains which set all the glasses chattering, the bottles quivering, listened to Louise and my mother, whose voices came down from the bedroom softly. When Louise coughed Louis's fingers tightened over the damp cloth with which he was wiping the water from the sink.

On the first floor of our house lodged a family called Neveu. The man was about forty-five, the woman slightly older, and their son, Lucien, was twenty-two. Father and son had fought in the

war. Mme Neveu and the daughter Jeanne, who now was married and lived elsewhere, had worked in a factory. M. Neveu had an allotment next to ours, and my father and he exchanged plants and seeds, and occasionally, when they had watered during the hot weather, they would have a drink together.

It was unfortunate that M. Neveu, taciturn and hard working, should have a wife who frittered away all the money he made. With the bonus the men had been given after the war she had taken this flat, which was a good deal larger than the others, but as there was no money left to buy any new furniture the rooms looked absurdly bare with only three beds, two chairs, and a table. They owned a large red cat, that often walked along the parapet to our windows and sometimes, when I woke in the morning, it was asleep at the foot of my bed.

Lucien, the son, was a giant. The father had probably been powerful in his day, but hard work had given him a heaped-up appearance like sand tightly packed in a bag. Lucien had hands like sledge-hammers. He wore a red neckerchief, a grey cap, and his carter's whip was thrown over his left shoulder. Lately he had been bringing his heavy tumbrel to our door, leaving it there for several hours while he went upstairs for a good sleep. His business just now was to deliver paving-stones to a gang of Italians mending the boulevard five minutes from where we lived. His horse, an enormous animal, whose harness was decorated with red topknots, pawing the asphalt under the hot sun, driven mad with flies, fought a lonely battle against thirst and the indifference of a Parisian street. Awakened suddenly, perhaps by his mother, more probably by some noise outside, Lucien, looking furious, would hurry down the stairs, run out to his horse, punch it in the neck with tremendous force, jump up on his load of stones, and crack his whip like a Roman charioteer. The heavy tumbrel quickly took off. One saw the horse's hoofs throw up sparks. An appalling noise shook the windows.

A day or two after our visit to Louis and Louise Duparc, Lucien Neveu, having repeated this episode, was sending his whip whistling over his horse's flanks when the animal must have slipped over the burning surface of the street or found the load too heavy. At any rate it fell right over, its four hoofs uppermost, and the shock was such that Lucien was thrown from his tumbrel, receiving a load of stones on his legs. He

picked himself up, swearing like the traditional carter, and hung on to the ends of the shafts, trying to bring them down by the weight of his huge body. We could see the veins of his neck standing out and becoming blue, and the muscles of his arms resembled those of a boxer. He succeeded without help in bringing down the shafts. A great crowd had gathered. Puffing and panting, straining and slipping, he did not cease to insult the onlookers and his horse, with whom he was now having a veritable battle trying to put it on its feet. He succeeded after kicking it cruelly for a full five minutes. From our first-floor window I was so sickened by the sight of his brutality that I covered him with shrill girlish insults. He looked up like a toreador facing a hostile crowd, and sent his whip cracking in my direction. The crowd protested. He then turned with lightning speed and cracked it half a dozen times over their cowering heads. On the advice of a passer-by, however, he unharnessed his horse, and with the help of this man he made it more comfortable, the stranger coaxing it and flattering it. Soon he was able to drive off and everything became quiet again.

The next day Mme Neveu came to ask if we had any milk. She told us that Lucien was in bed with a stitch in his side and that she was going to fetch a doctor. My mother had no milk, but offered to take the young man some coffee which we had just brewed. 'That will do just as well,' said Mme Neveu. 'Here is the key. Would you mind taking it to him while I go to the doctor?'

My mother, bearing in mind the scene of yesterday, was a little nervous about her reception. 'But there was no need to be afraid,' she told me on her return. 'He was in bed, pale, shaking with fever, as weak as yesterday we saw him strong.' The doctor came, made his auscultation, and told Mme Neveu that he would have him taken to hospital immediately in an ambulance. The mother, blinded by her tears, was helped by mine to wash him, change his shirt, and put on his Sunday clothes. When the ambulance arrived two men lifted Lucien with infinite care, placed him beautifully dressed on a stretcher, went down the stairs almost on tiptoe, and placing him in the ambulance drove off as smoothly and as silently as twenty-four hours earlier Lucien had gone violently on his way. This big man practically without sign of life had surprised us more than anything else. We

hardly dared speak about it, for we none of us doubted that heaven had sent down a swift and terrible vengeance. We had admired the Herculean force of a giant who had been abased with the ruthlessness of biblical law.

The red cat came in through the window, and spent the rest of the day with us. Towards nightfall Mme Neveu came in to tell us that Lucien had double pneumonia and a lesion of the heart. The doctors had said that the powerful frame hid a multitude of weaknesses. The poor woman went every morning to visit her son; then one day returned earlier than usual, saying: 'He was still warm, but it's finished. The funeral will be Saturday at eleven.' She went across the corridor to her own flat, and we heard her howl like a she-wolf. M. Neveu became more heaped up than ever. On the Saturday morning they went to the hospital. It was pouring. They had to wait more than an hour for the procession, which they then followed on foot to St. Ouen. When they came back in the evening M. Neveu was scarcely recognizable. The next morning he stayed in bed, coughing, and it was not till the following Sunday that he put his soldier's cape over his shoulders and tried to dig a little in the garden. My father was shocked by his drawn features, by his pallor and his thin body. The two men planted a few seeds, walked home together, and as M. Neveu was in a cold perspiration, his wife put him to bed and called the doctor. Pneumonia having set in it was too late to take him to hospital. A week later he was dead.

Two men, our neighbours, having died within three weeks of each other, the street began to murmur: 'Never two in a house but it's three. You'll see, there'll be a third!' And all the men in our house were passed in review, to discover who it would be.

Mme Neveu, heart-broken, went off with the red cat to live at her married daughter's house, and we felt a little better thinking she had taken away the bad luck.

Summer was starting, and the people in the street lived at open windows. After lunch the doorkeepers put their red velvet chairs on the pavement and nodded to the postman, remarking on the heat, as he came along with piles of catalogues from the great stores. One's thoughts instinctively turned to straw hats and pretty light dresses.

I was hoping soon to pass my shorthand examination, after which I could be certain of a reasonable salary, but though I worked very hard I was not good at it. The speed refused to come. When Mme Duville made her little speech about 'those who have not missed a word will have done seventy to the minute' I felt like throwing pad and pencil out of the window. My father, since his homecoming with Louis Duparc, had become very reasonable, working on Sundays in his garden from dawn till almost nightfall. One evening, after taking some lettuces to Louis at the café, my father told us that their little boy had arrived with his grandmother. Louise had just not been able to do without him, but the poor little boy, unaccustomed now to his parents, tripping up against the marble-topped tables, not knowing where to play, deafened by the noise of the trains, could not make out why he had been brought back from his grandmother's wide fields and lovely garden. Louise quickly noticed her son's indifference. She had thought about him night and day; he would not even look at her—a quick glance out of the window and he would slip out of the bedroom. The boy's callousness sunk into her heart like a knife. From that moment she became weaker and, quite gently, died in her sleep. Louis's tears, those of the mother, and the whistle of the goods trains filled the room horribly. The little boy went back to the country with his grandmother, and Louis made arrangements to sell the miserable café.



# 16

**A**T the bottom of our house, exactly below our windows, was a newly opened bicycle shop. A good-looking young man, with very dark hair, who spoke with a strong Spanish accent, worked from dawn till dusk mending punctures, blowing up inner tubes, and arranging handlebars. On summer evenings and on Sunday mornings his tiny shop and all the street outside was crowded with French, Spanish, Belgian, and Italian racing cyclists and their backers and enthusiasts. Bicycle racing was the most popular national sport. The dream of every youth was to bend over the lowest possible handlebars, a spare inner tube slung from shoulder to waist, and pedal, pedal, pedal round France, from Brittany to Biarritz and from Nice to the Belgian frontier, up mountain roads, along powdery miles of poplar-shaded ribbon, snatching their food and drink from comrades as they passed.

These young men, arguing, elbowing, gesticulating round a machine or a tyre, dressed in orange or violet sweaters, or both colours together, filled our street with their vociferous presence. None of them lived in the neighbourhood. They arrived like a company of starlings at six o'clock on a Sunday morning, and whilst the Spanish owner noisily threw up the steel curtain of his shop, commenting on the races of the previous day, his followers would make figures of eight and sudden spurts in the still rather milky dawn. Former soldiers, aviators, and tank designers soon came to encourage the young generation, tapping them amicably on the shoulders, cracking an obscene army joke, feeling younger by this contact with youth, and then suddenly the whole company of sportsmen, with a last ringing of bells, their supple bodies arched over their specially constructed machines, would go off in one long tightly packed line for a distant destination. The owner brought down the steel curtain of his shop as noisily as he had thrown it up, and went home to breakfast. The entire company would return at five exhausted

but happy, flowers tied to their handlebars, anxious to spend the next hour or two discussing the labours of the day.

At this moment Marie Guillet, as if by mere chance, would go to her window and play her violin, whereupon the youths would look up and cheer, and making a trumpet of their hands cry out: 'Play something else!' Marie blushed, made signs to suggest that her modesty forbade it, and then suddenly ran down into the street with the air of a person who has suddenly remembered an urgent errand. Emerging amongst all these boys, flustered and self-conscious, swinging her hips and casting down her eyes, she would go as far as the first turning on the left, down which she would disappear. Ten minutes later, having walked round the block, she reappeared from the opposite end of the street, became flustered again, and looked for the face of a timely neighbour with whom she could talk for a few moments before going back to her flat. The boys, at the sight of her, stopped arguing. A curious stillness fell. Some of them had sensed the trick; but Marie was fifteen, chubby, with a big posterior, large breasts, and a pretty pair of legs. Meeting nobody she knew, she slowly crossed the road, wiped her shoes lengthily and unnecessarily on the threshold to gain another minute or two, and then, head lowered, looking round archly at a slant to intrigue them, dived into the corridor. One heard her running up the stairs, the door of the flat opening and closing. Then the boys in the street, like sparrows to whom you throw crumbs, all lifted their heads at the same time to catch a glimpse of Marie at her window. A moment later, ashamed to have been subjugated by this girl, they became self-conscious, and broke out as one voice:

'Well, she has got a nerve, hasn't she?'

The spell was over. Their sporting instincts again took possession of them, and their exclamations and arguments reverted to the subject of bicycles.

On Monday morning the postman brought us a letter from England.

Aunt Marguerite said that just now she had a little girl staying with her, but that in a few weeks she would be delighted to have me. My uncle was already looking round for a firm who would be glad to employ a young French typist. Would my mother be sure to make me go on with my shorthand? It would be of the greatest use.

This friendly letter gave my mother some relief. She began to make inquiries about a passport, but as I was under age I needed my father's permission to leave the country. The letter was hidden under some shelf paper in the dresser. Meanwhile she and I had both taken to knitting. We each made a sock for my father; mine had a square toe, my mother's was pointed like the hat of a Chinese mandarin. When my father put them on one Sunday morning we laughed happily, listening to his merry talk in patois. He put on his heavy boots and went to the allotment, where he was sowing a great diversity of seeds, the weather being fine. He came home that evening tired, in excellent humour, but anxious to go quickly to bed. 'I've nothing more to worry about,' he said. 'I've planted everything but the runner beans.'

The next evening my father complained that his breathing was painful. Instead of going off to sleep as soon as his head touched the pillow he tossed feverishly. My mother made an infusion, and as he was drinking it he said:

'Matilda, I'm afraid I've got what I had last time. You remember, when we were all three ill?'

She took his hand and found it warm, but she answered:

'I expect it's only a chill.'

In the morning he was so much worse that on my way to short-hand school I called on the doctor, asking him to hurry across, and when I came back for lunch my mother said he had been but could say nothing definite till the evening. He had wanted my father to be taken to hospital, but unfortunately my father had overheard the conversation, and his anxious face had assumed the most miserable expression. For my father hospital was the last extremity. He had left my little brother there. Young Neveu had died there. My mother, in the doctor's presence, had said firmly to my father:

'You won't go to hospital. I promise you that. I'll nurse you here.'

The doctor came back before supper and spoke very jovially to my father. He said:

'I often see you crossing the square with some of the lettuces from your garden. One day you'll be winning a prize for them.'

'Ah, doctor!' answered my father. 'Get me out of this and the first, the largest, will be for you!'

'But that 's just what I 'm going to do !' answered Dr. Ravaud. 'Now try to sleep and I 'll go and write out a prescription on the kitchen table.'

Dr. Ravaud closed the door behind him, and going over to the open window said in a whisper to my mother :

'Your husband has double pneumonia. You know what it is. In nine days he will be out of danger—or dead. A great deal depends on the fight he puts up. You would have done better to send him to hospital, but there 's no teaching some people. Still, if you insist on nursing him, though you 'll have a lot of trouble, it *can* be done. You must be brave and patient, and learn to economize your strength to go right through with a job you should never have undertaken.'

He looked at me and said :

'Go to your father, and if he asks what I 've said tell him I 'm writing out a long prescription and that I 'm explaining things to your mother. You 'll have to help, you know.'

I was surprised at the way he spoke to me. When I was down with influenza he had treated me as a child. Now I sensed that he took me to be a young woman. I went in to my father to calm him, and as soon as the doctor had gone went to the chemist for a thermometer, a bed-pan, a hot-water bottle, and some little bags of linseed and mustard for the compresses the doctor had ordered.

The patient had to drink a great deal. To find milk became a necessity. My mother went from the bedroom to the kitchen all day, and my father's eyes used to follow her pitifully like those of an affectionate dog. The compresses were extremely tiring to make. He was like a little child to nurse. We could do what we liked with him. The important thing was to keep him propped up in bed, and as we were short of pillows my mother sent me to a corn chandler to buy a bundle of straw, which she covered with a bed sheet to make a pillow for his back. When my father saw this arrangement he said :

'You see, Matilda, you were right. You always said I would come down to sleeping on straw. I 've made a rotten failure of life.'

'Don't be silly,' my mother answered. 'You 're not going to lie on it. It 's simply to rest your back against.'

'I 'm worried about the money,' he went on. 'All these things must cost a fortune.'

'Yes, they do,' agreed my mother. 'That's why I've always pinched to have something aside for a time like this. And I expect the health insurance will give us something.'

He was very quick to reassure himself, looking at her affectionately and commenting: 'How good you are!' He had never seen his wife so gentle and loving. Unwilling to spoil the effect by too much hard thinking he asked:

'Where's the little girl?'

'At her shorthand class.'

'My! Isn't she becoming clever!'

'She's jolly well got to!' exclaimed my mother with emphasis. 'Perhaps she'll be the one to get us out of all this mess, especially if'—she looked quickly at my father—'if she could go to England. I feel sure that Marguerite and her husband would look after her. While you and I were quietly here, not worrying, she would be forging ahead.'

'Do you really think so? But it's such a long way off!'

'My poor Émile!' snapped my mother. 'You don't really suppose that a girl like Madeleine will spend her life between the Place Clichy and the Place de la République! We've walked up and down the avenue often enough, you and I, and a fat lot of good it has done us! No! Madeleine will have to try her luck somewhere else, beginning all on her own.'

My father was too weak to say anything. Matilda, having sown the seed, went over to the window, which the doctor insisted must always be half open, and looking down into the street said:

'There's M. Gontrel going off with his violin. The poor man doesn't look too steady on his legs. Listen to him insulting the *concierge*, saying that he hopes she'll find a bushel of fleas in her bed!'

My father laughed and said:

'He's lucky to be on his feet at all. I envy him!'

'Come!' exclaimed my mother indignantly. 'You who never envy anybody! Surely you don't envy that miserable old man? Hallo! There's Mme Luche, who is going to have a baby, and M. Campion driving his taxi home. That means it is seven. I must take your temperature.'

When she had removed the thermometer she would say brightly:

'Excellent! Quite a bit better this evening. The doctor will be delighted.'

She lied. His temperature rose every day. The doctor shook his head and tried to reassure her.

'But that's the way it always is, Mme Gal. Now I told you the other day. You must keep calm.'

I took to getting up at five, having discovered a dairy in front of a shed in which there were four or five cows. This vestige of country life was in the rue Martre, quite a long way off. The animals, of course, were never put on grass. Their fodder was piled to the roof of this grey wooden edifice, outside which, every morning and evening, a queue of women formed, each holding a jug. If I was lucky I came away with half a pint. I would run home, put this down on the kitchen table, take hold of an empty jug, and go off in search of a little more, for milk was the only nourishment that seemed to do my father much good.

I would then do the shopping and go out and buy a paper, which my mother would read to him while waiting for the doctor. I don't think my father was interested in the news. His thoughts were continually in his garden, wondering if the seeds he had planted needed watering. In the end he worried so much that one morning, after the doctor had been, my mother and I set off with a watering-can and came back exhausted with a bunch of parsley and a salad. When my father saw these trophies he took the parsley in his feverish hand and smelt it. A smile broke out on his drawn features. 'Are the seeds coming up?' he asked in a whisper.

'Not yet, but we watered them.'

'The salad's a beauty!'

'Yes, it's the first.'

'Oh, and the radishes?'

'Yes, they're coming up, and the strawberries are in bud!' I exclaimed. 'Only I'm afraid the slugs will be at them!'

'And now listen to this,' said my mother. 'There's a piece of news. Mme Gontrel is in a terrible state. She thinks her husband has gone off with another woman. She hasn't seen him for two days. Riri keeps on asking for his balloon, and there's not a penny left in the house.'

'Gone off with another woman!' repeated my father. Then winking: 'You see, Matilda, I was right to envy him!'

My mother looked shocked.

'A man with two children who still thinks of that sort of thing! It's horrible!'

M. Gontrel's disappearance was the chief news in our street. Some were sorry for Mme Gontrel. Others claimed she richly deserved it. Didine, whose rum omelets I had not tasted for a long time, took M. Gontrel's side. She said he had probably gone off to be fiddler to a wedding in the country. Mme Maurer felt certain he had fallen in love. M. Campion, who drove a taxi, thought he had recognized M. Gontrel talking to a foreigner. Poor little Dédée Gontrel was ashamed to show herself in the street. She was obliged to go off with her mother to collect the sixpences when she sang in the courtyards of rich houses.

As each important day slipped by my father, emerging from his long periods of semi-consciousness, asked:

'And Gontrel, the rascal, has he come home yet?'

'No,' my mother answered with compressed lips, 'I doubt if he'll have the face to show himself.'

My mother and I went to my father's factory to tell them about his illness and to draw his pay. Down by the Seine where the Americans had camped during the last years of the war were wide fields of beetroot. The many factories which had turned Clichy into a state of activity were now idle and falling to pieces. Those that by some accident were still working dismissed a few men every week. One felt that paralysis had touched this low ground watered by the majestic river. At my father's factory the foreman broke us the news that even if my father got better there would be no work for him. We crossed rather a big yard. Two or three men came to ask us news about my father, and then went about their business.

At the end of the fourth day the doctor prescribed bleeding by cupping glasses. It was to be done by a professional whose wife was a midwife. I went to call him. He lived next to the public wash-house. Two hours later he arrived with a wicker basket full of tiny bell-glasses shaped like the ones market gardeners use to grow their lettuces under. He went in to my father with all this clinking apparatus, lit a candle by the bedside, and with dexterity and gentleness placed the bells on my father's back, each with a piece of burning cotton wool inside. The skin rose and turned red. When there were about forty in position

and my father's breathing made these ghastly things with their lurid lights dance one against the other, the man swept them away, and with a small instrument drew blood where each had been. The operation was horrible to watch. In the kitchen, as he was going, the man said:

'Tell the doctor it's hardly worth doing them again. They weren't very successful. We shall hurt him for nothing.'

My mother wrote to the Agnells at the Grand' Combe, to cousin Prosper Nègre, and to my Aunt Marguerite in London to say my father was very ill, though I do not think we expected any answer. His only relations were too far away. The doctor now told my mother that she was doing too much and must try and rest. She had put a mattress on the kitchen floor for me. This evening she would sleep till midnight and I would watch my father.

We were in the middle of a heat-wave. I was writing at a table. Up through the open window came the young voices of the bicycle enthusiasts, who had come in force. They were laughing, ringing their bells, making figures of eight, shouting to distant friends. The evening dragged oppressively. I looked across to my father. His face was getting a pinched look, his nose seemed to be growing more important, and I found it difficult, looking at him, to remember his everyday appearance. His hair, stuck together with perspiration, made him a skull-cap like a cardinal, and his hands, normally so large and red, had turned white and almost thin. His heavy breathing cut into the joyful cries of the youths in the street. Eventually the cyclists went off in a cloud of dust. The Spaniard let down his steel shutter. My father opened his eyes and asked:

'Where's Matilda?'

'Asleep next door. Do you want her?'

'No, it isn't that. Only it's the first time I've woken up and not seen her next to me.'

I gave him something to drink and he turned his face to the wall. His neck was terribly thin. He murmured:

'Oh, the heat! The heat!'

One now heard the lamp-lighter treading past, shutters being closed, doorkeepers taking in their chairs. A certain Mme Camille, one of our tenants, was playing the piano with two fingers. She would begin:

'C'est mon homme——'



Her mother, leaning out of the window to catch the last breezes of the night, continued the words of the famous song:

'Ce n'est pas qu'il soit beau, mais je l'aime. C'est idiot!'

Her voice brought other housewives to their not yet shuttered windows, and one heard:

'Good night, Mme Jeanne. What heat!'

Camille, louder with two fingers and trying to drown her mother's conversation, went on:

'Mon seul bonheur, sur cette terre, c'est mon homme!'

Finally they also, beaten by a desire to sleep, closed their shutters, and the clock on the state schools struck midnight. Distantly one heard the *Sacré Cœur* booming over Montmartre, which would now be waking up to tangos and fox-trots. The terrace at Wepler's would be full. Grooms would be crying out for taxis. The roundabouts would be turning in the avenue. I felt very little, and very afraid alone with my father. Only fifteen years old was the little Madeleine, but already she had lost her two brothers, been through a long war, and was now meeting the spectres of illness and unemployment. . . . My father was asleep, but his breathing was raucous.

Fairly early in the morning two policemen on bicycles stopped in front of the house where Marguerite Rosier lived and asked for Mme Gontrel. This news was quickly disseminated. There had been a rumour since yesterday that Mme Gontrel had gone to the police. She had spent a whole night in Montmartre, prowling round the cafés outside which he generally played his violin, questioning waiters, street singers, flower sellers, and taxi-cab drivers in the hope of getting to know something. He had not been seen since the night he failed to return home. Mme Gontrel thought it better to confide in the police. If he had gone off with another woman, at least she would know the truth. The police had begun their inquiry. Everybody became interested in this miserable man whom they used to chase from café to café, from street bench to street bench when he sank down on them in the early hours exhausted.

The two policemen remained about an hour with Mme Gontrel. One of them went to fetch a red taxi-cab from the Porte Clichy. We next saw Mme Gontrel, without Riri in her arms, coming down with the policemen and getting into the taxi. She was

very white, and refused to say anything to anybody. Riri and Dédée were entrusted to a neighbour.

About an hour later she came back.

The police had driven her to the morgue where, among tramps and unfortunates thrown up by the muddy waters of the Seine, she saw behind glass a poor wizened figure, green and black, his head bashed in, a celluloid windmill peeping out of his torn jacket.

He had been attacked and robbed by apaches on the fortifications. Knowing his habits they had lain in wait for him during the cold dawn as he was coming back from the rue Blanche, where the night clubs had thrown out their hot jazz melodies. His body had been found in a lonely spot where thistles and tall tough grass, blown by a sweeping wind, had hidden him for four days. His violin was discovered half a mile away, in a ditch by the railway that ran past Louis Duparc's fateful café.

This story swept through the street. My father, as he always did, turned to my mother and asked:

'And Gontrel, the rascal, has he come home yet?'

My mother told him what had happened. He turned to me and said:

'Madelon, you must be very careful at night near those fortifications. Matilda, don't let the little girl go to Paris any more alone.'

He thought things over a minute and added:

'Poor fellow, and fancy everybody accusing him of going off with another woman! How will the children get on now? And poor Riri? How sorry I am for them!'

The next morning my father, opening his eyes, looked at my mother, who was bending over him, and took her hand. He looked at her with a gentleness and affection which touched her and said:

'You're still there, Matilda?'

'Why, yes, of course, Émile.'

Now he was at the point of death. It was still very early, and we were in our night-gowns, not quite understanding. Later he became conscious again, looked round him, stretched out a hand and shook with extreme violence the chair we normally used by his bedside, called my mother's name, and sank back for the last time.

Émile—Milou, the strong, the strongest of all the Gals, was dead.

**M**Y mother had gone out. I was alone and rather afraid of the recumbent white form, so very tall and still, which I could see on the bed through the open door. The heat-wave continued, but we only had the kitchen now. I was impatient for my mother to come back. 'Mother!' I called out. She would be the only one to hear me from now on. Why was she so long? I wanted to escape, to run into the street, to hear some noise, to see people. At last, my mother returning, I threw myself into her arms in such a fever that she thought something must have happened. She could not believe that merely to see her alive could give me such immense joy.

I had been writing some addresses on envelopes with wide black edges. I pictured one of them being delivered at the house half-way up the mountain at the Grand' Combe, and I let fall a tear at the thought of Aunt Eugénie exclaiming 'That must be our poor Milou who is dead!' I had addressed one to my Aunt Marguerite in England, but my mother had not wanted me to send one to Marie-Thérèse, saying it would be bad taste after not being on speaking terms for so long.

She now told me to go to the post office at the corner of the street, a sub-post office where the woman spent all her time threading pearls on brass wire to make garlands of flowers and leaves to decorate funeral wreaths. I was to post the letters and order a wreath on which there was to be a message in gold letters on white ribbon.

Our funds were now very low. The doctor and the chemist had delved deeply into the savings of the provident ant that was my mother.

Mme Maurer, pointing out that I was still very young, and that we had no family to help us, advised my mother to ask the parish to bury my father. This suggestion shocked my mother profoundly. She hated to think that my father would lie in a coffin of white wood instead of one made of oak. Mme Maurer said

that the second-class funeral we could afford for my father would in no way help him, whereas the money we saved might make all the difference to the continuation of our lives. This hard logic convinced my mother, who was obliged to ask two neighbours to go with her to the town hall and swear that we were paupers. She had been doing this when, alone in the kitchen, seeing my father stretched out under the white sheet in the adjoining room, I had been so frightened. At all events the town hall accepted my mother's request, and the funeral was fixed for 9th April in the afternoon.

On my return from posting the letters and ordering the wreath a young man called at our flat and handed my mother her identity papers, in which she had put my father's death certificate and almost all her money. She gave a cry of relief, not yet having discovered this important loss. The young man then told her how unwise she had been to put her money in her private papers, 'for if I had been dishonest,' he said, 'I would have thrown away the documents to hide the theft of the money.'

Abashed by this sensible remark made in a strong male voice my mother and I glanced at each other, conscious of what our future was going to be without a man's protection and advice. The young stranger, before we could thank him, doffed his cap and was gone down the stairs. We hurried into the kitchen to comment on the news, but almost immediately the door bell rang a second time.

A young workman stood before us cap in hand. He had come in the name of all my father's companions at the factory. My mother said to him: 'Would you like to see him,' and then in a whisper, as if my father might be listening: 'He's in there.'

I could not accustom myself to the tallness of the white figure whose presence so entirely filled the room. The young workman looked at my father a moment, then, going close to him, tapped him amicably on the shoulder. He then turned and taking a long envelope from his coat pocket handed it to my mother, who discovered one hundred francs and a long list of names. With tears in her eyes she read: 'Giraud, five francs; Dupis, five francs; M. Dumay, foreman, ten francs.' The young workman said:

'We didn't know at the time, but we thought you might be in

trouble. The factory is closing down on Saturday. We shall all be out of work. For me, being young, it doesn't matter so much. I'll find something. But for those'—he turned and nodded in the direction of my father under the white sheet—'of his age it will be pretty tough. He went just in time, madam, I promise you.'

Then going to the door, after a last salutation to my father, a movement full of dignity, he shook us by the hand and took his leave.

As soon as we were alone my mother carefully closed the kitchen door. I did not leave her shadow and she guessed the fear in me. She spoke loudly, put the lamp close to me, and gave me the hem of my black dress to sew. She said:

'All the men of the family have gone, your two brothers and now—him.'

We slept on the mattress on the kitchen floor, I very close to my mother; but soon she, alarmed by the strength and vividness of my nightmares, got up and lit a lamp, giving me a sleeping draught.

The next day the sun came out hotter than on any day.

Mme Maurer crossed the street to see us, and my mother told her about my night. I think my mother was seriously worried about me. She could sense that with my father having been so long in the adjoining room, the heat increasing, she and I imprisoned in this tiny foetid kitchen, I would soon lose my nerve.

'Let her be!' exclaimed Mme Maurer in her deep incisive voice. 'It's only in watching death that she'll learn to live. She's sensitive, has a vivid imagination—don't give her sleeping draughts! There are so many people in this world who are as callous as paving-stones. Your little Madeleine will make her own life. Let her cry, and fear, and go through all the range of emotions. That's life. Crying and laughing. Then, when she's my age, she will have a range of experiences and emotions to draw on. She will be sorry for people who suffer. She will cry when they cry, and perhaps comfort them. Hide nothing from your little Madeleine, and if later her luck changes, she'll know something about both worlds.'

The day dragged on.

Towards evening the coffin was brought. My mother made me stay in the kitchen, where the noise of furniture being moved

hammered at my heart. Then, towards eight, two little men, all in black, arrived. We were so surprised neither my mother nor I could speak. They were my Uncle Ernest and Henri Toulouse, who had travelled half through the night and all through the hot day to guard my father during his last night. Uncle Ernest said:

‘My wife Eugénie didn’t want her Milou, full of sunshine, to be put into the cold earth of Paris without somebody from his family being there.’

He was so upset that he sat down, and he was so tired with the journey and the different air that his head drooped like an ill bird. My mother took pity on them both. She said:

‘I’ll watch my husband. Go and have a good sleep and come back to-morrow.’

The next day M. Gontrel came home, also in a pauper’s coffin.

It was the usual thing, on the last day, for the coffin to be put out in the entrance hall of the house, with the wreaths placed on it and some crape on either side of the front door with a notice edged in black giving the details. The neighbours, even those who were indifferent, uncovered their heads, the women made the sign of the cross, and thus paid a last tribute to the tenant who was about to leave the house, the street, and even that part of Paris where he had been a familiar figure.

M. Gontrel lay in the entrance hall opposite ours. The tenants collected some money and bought a wreath, which they put on the coffin. It was the only one. Mme Gontrel, dressed in weeds that had been lent to her, wandered about with Riri clasped to her breast. Dédée, blacker than black, recalling her father, recounted the details to anybody who liked to listen. The doorkeeper, so often insulted by the violinist, devotedly arranged the material round the coffin, not daring to polish the stairs or to use her broom.

My father, resting on two chairs opposite, thus faced the man whose lot he had momentarily envied. The hearse which came to fetch M. Gontrel at two returned for my father at four. Uncle Ernest and Toulouse, Marguerite Rosier and Louis Duparc, my mother and I, walked behind. When I imagined my father bringing home his lettuces, my heart broke, but my mother, hidden behind her long black veil, remained dry eyed. The sun burned into our dyed clothes. As my father was being lowered

into the grave a goods train, passing by Louis's café, let out its strident whistle. Louise was here now. Her grave was a month old, and she had begun the alley which the violinist and my father were finishing. In the middle was M. Neveu, whose son had died from so fiercely beating his horse. All these neighbours continued to be neighbours in death as perhaps they would be on the day of judgment.

When we returned home, the fresh air in a great draught now sweeping through the little flat, my Uncle Ernest, looking very small in his Sunday clothes, could hardly wait to unbutton his pointed boots. He put more comfortable ones on, and, as he and Toulouse were going to take the night train, we all had dinner in a little restaurant of the Boulevard Victor-Hugo.

In front of the bottle of red wine and the steak and fried potatoes set out on white paper, we began to talk of the Grand' Combes. Ernestine had a little girl, Henriette, just a few months old. Toulouse was very proud. Luck, too, was coming his way. Irma had lost her fiancé during the war, and her parents, wishing to retire, had let their beautiful café to Toulouse, who for ever had abandoned the trade of hairdresser for that of café owner. Ernestine sat like a queen at the cash-desk, and soon her little Henriette would be playing round her skirts. Oh, how happy they were! Uncle Ernest intended to work four more years down the mine and then retire to his mountain fastness, half-way to heaven, with a grand-daughter to cherish.

Uncle Ernest asked my mother for a walking-stick with an ivory handle which my father had used when he broke his leg. My mother opened a drawer of the sideboard. Here were my father's razors and half a dozen square packets of tobacco. She gave them to my uncle, who opened a little black bag and slipped them in. They both kissed my mother and gave her a final word of consolation. I watched them going down the street, my uncle wearing a curious round-shaped hat, leaning on his stick, not quite used to the feel of it, turning round for a last good-bye, and then he and Toulouse suddenly hurrying to catch the train that would take them back to their eternal sunshine.

MME DUVILLE'S pupils were taking part in a state examination which, if they passed it, would give them a recognized diploma. I had missed so many classes that I had no chance of success, but Mme Duville advised me to compete for the experience. She said it would give me greater confidence next time.

Girls from all over Paris gathered in the big examination hall overlooking La Nation, a very large grey square near the Gare de Lyon, which just now was preparing for a gay and noisy spring fair. The weather had changed. The heat-wave, breaking up violently, had been followed by intense cold. Anybody would have thought it was mid winter. In the morning, during our first hour, snow fell thickly on the booths of the fortune-tellers and the coco-nut shies.

We all filed out for lunch together and, of course, few of us knew this distant part of Paris. Gipsies were tugging at ropes, hammering, and putting the machinery in order. It seemed to me the coldest, most miserable place I had ever seen. The gipsies, seeing us, decided it was time for lunch, and hurried into nice warmed caravans, where babies yelled and from which smoke rose in homely spirals. We, the future shorthand typists, thought of our hard-boiled eggs and sandwiches, wondering where we could shelter from the snow to eat them. A piece of tarpaulin, beating in the wind, revealed a covered-up roundabout. Ostriches, piglets, and various other animals which on bank holiday would turn swiftly to music, shone with gay paint. We looked at each other knowingly, and squeezed through, clambering on the backs of animals and birds. We laughed, I the loudest of any. I was deliriously happy with girls of my own age. All the horrors of the last three weeks rushed out of my system. Perched on the back of a giraffe I must have looked like a scarecrow in my black clothes.



Going home in the evening the snow seeped through my shoes. I was soaked, and when I took my jacket off my arms were stained with cheap dye, but nothing seemed to matter quite so much. I told my mother that half-way through the dictation I had given up. She sympathized and said that for the next few days the important thing was to eat and sleep.

The sun came back on Sunday, and we went to the allotment. Between the various rows of newly planted vegetables we could not help imagining my father, his yachting cap at an angle, watering. His spade, the handle made smooth by the sweat of his hands, was carefully put away in the tool-house. The most recently bought packet of seeds was just as he had left it on the rickety table. The peas were coming up nicely. He would have been delighted. But how could we be expected to tear up the weeds which were already stifling the vegetables? A new man had taken over M. Neveu's garden. He welcomed us in a polite way and started to talk, leaning over the hedge which separated the two gardens. He said he was a bachelor, living with an unmarried sister and his mother, and that he was quite willing to advise us, and even help with the digging. My mother, though touched, was vexed at his insistence, but fortunately, as he was trying to climb over the fence, somebody else came along.

Mme Maurer advised us to sell my father's tools and his clothes to give us a better start in our new life. His tool-box was of iron and very heavy, and he used to keep it at the bottom of our only wardrobe, so we were rather glad to get rid of it. There were hammers and pliers which we took to the merchants in the Boulevard Victor-Hugo, who handled them disdainfully, and gave us a few pence for treasures which my father considered amongst his most valuable possessions. His hats were in a band-box given him by Marie-Thérèse—a strange collection consisting of a bowler, a panama, a straw boater with a black ribbon clipped to the brim and which could be fastened to the buttonhole on windy days, and a tall silk hat doubtless emanating from my Uncle Louis's rich employer. At the bottom was a tiny beret with a red topknot belonging to my baby brother. My mother, at the sight of this, cried. She would not sell it, preferring to burn something which might have made strangers laugh. She then went through my father's shoes and his suits which we laid out on the bed, where they looked like men without heads.

My mother's conversation, meanwhile, showed a marked change of tone. She did not mention my father's bad habits any more, but said briskly:

'Your Uncle Louis gave us this piece of grey suiting. I think it came from one of the smart tailors in London. You know, a man needs to be tall and slim to wear a suit well. Your Uncle Louis, for instance, though he is supposed to be a terror with the women, never had your father's distinction!'

I looked up surprised at the gay, proud air, and answered:

'Oh, yes, my father had something.'

The next day we went to pay Dr. Ravaud. He looked at me and said:

'The little girl has become an almost too good-looking young woman. What are you going to do with yourself?' Then, remembering that I had attended shorthand school: 'Why, yes, of course, a shorthand typist. A more difficult profession than most people believe.'

He put the money in his waistcoat pocket, and took us to the door with a mixture of goodness and indifference.

We now turned seriously to the future.

My mother had lost all her customers. They had gone elsewhere when my father fell ill, though we might have lost them anyway because of the slump. As usual Mme Maurer made a suggestion. This woman had become a great influence in our lives for good and bad. She was a careful reader of small advertisements in the newspapers, chiefly for her son who was looking for something different, and had noticed that a lot of women were asking for a person to sew and mend at their homes. My mother answered one of these and was engaged by a regular officer's wife in the military district of the Motte-Piquet, from eight in the morning to eight at night, for lunch and ten shillings a day. She was on the point of setting out one day when a telegram came. I remember her standing by the door, wearing her large hat. She exclaimed:

'Aunt Marguerite's husband is dead!'

The paper fell from her hands.

'Think of it!' she whispered, turning quite white. 'We are both widows within twelve days!'

'Then I shall have to start all over again!' I said dismally.

She looked at me quickly and answered:

'This isn't the morning for me to get the sack. I must go. We'll talk about it to-night.' She ran to the window, pulled back the curtain, and continued: 'If it isn't raining! First one thing and then another. I did want this hat to last six months. We might have a bit more money then.' She fingered the brim angrily. 'This cheap stuff simply melts in the rain!'

The next day there was a letter. My uncle had died very suddenly. He had complained of feeling tired. His heart was thumping. He stretched out a hand to pick up a book, and that was the end. My aunt said I must be patient. As soon as she had put her affairs in order she was coming to Paris and would talk it over.

I therefore looked round for another job, and found one in a factory in the Boulevard Victor-Hugo.

In a huge office sat a great quantity of women of every age and quality, some from Paris, some from Clichy, all unbelievably gay. We used to arrive at 8.15, and from then till 8.30 the entire company, in a deafening chatter, talked about their love affairs; and when the head of the department arrived, breaking through these waves of femininity, some hurried to their typewriters, others to the accounts department, and the rest to other duties like the telephone exchange. It was just a riot of cool white or coloured blouses. The fashion or *bon ton* of the place was ruled by the four sisters Maréchal. The eldest, Mlle Arlette, of the accounts department, sat in front of M. Piétry, the chief accountant, whose beautiful white hands passed through his fine black beard in a series of slow and amorous caresses. M. Piétry came from Paris, and had the dignity of a doctor or a notary. Though he was slightly affected in his speech and manners he was always gracious, especially with the eldest Maréchal who, emboldened by her situation of favourite, had successively brought her sisters Edith, Adrienne, and Gabrielle each to rule a section of the office.

Arlette was a lovely girl who, extremely aware of her importance, treated the rest of us with the slightly condescending goodness of the morganatic wife of a grand duke. Her three sisters were lumped together under the respectful title of the 'young ladies Maréchal.' All dressed as Arlette dressed. Arlette gave the tone, first to her sisters, then to the office as a whole. When, on Monday morning, Mlle Arlette and her three sisters arrived, marching very close together, everybody jumped up to

see what they were wearing. They must have spent the whole of every Sunday recasting a hat or making a new blouse. The fashion in hats that spring was for immense bows of tulle against a dark crown. There was nothing easier than to make oneself a pretty model—one chose a frame of light *sparterie*, covered it with dark-coloured silk, then brightened up the whole thing with a great blob of vivid tulle. The first Monday I was there the Maréchal sisters, all four of them, turned up in black hats with masses of coral tulle, airy, crisp, full of life and sweetness. The eldest, tall in any circumstances, seemed a giantess with this extra height. Edith, less tall, was sheltered from the arrows of the waiting multitude by the fact that she kept her hierarchical position of one step behind her sister, covered by her wing, so to speak. The two young ones immensely enjoyed the obvious commotion they were making. These extraordinary hats, after leaving the heads of their wearers, were hung up on hat-stands, where they entirely covered up a great quantity of sombre male headgear. Their flashing airiness brought coral flames to the dull brown walls. One was for ever looking up from one's typewriter to admire them.

The Maréchals lived near the café which Louis and Louise Duparc once owned. The four young women crossed the whole of Clichy four times a day—in the morning and the evening, and back and forth for lunch. Dominating the crowd by their tallness as they dominated the office by their importance, one saw their hats waving up and down like pink sails on a choppy sea. Their rhythm was perfect. I think they even kept in step. I used to go with them as far as the Place de la République. From here I ran home for lunch. Afterwards I waited for them on the kerb. Unfortunately I could not rival their gay hats and blouses, being immutably in black. I was obliged to make up for it by being the happiest and lightest hearted of all, and my laughter rose in ripples even higher than their tulle.

Once or twice a week my mother stayed at home. On one of these mornings as I was coming back for lunch I saw her leaning out of the window, smiling, making signs for me to hurry. I raced up the stairs and as soon as I arrived she pointed to the bed, where she had laid out a delicious white blouse with the slightest but prettiest black markings. She said she was revolted to see my youth drowned in this cruel mourning, and she did not mind

what the neighbours thought. I put the blouse on immediately. My heart truly beat with joy, and I rushed back to the Maréchaux to be suitably admired.

On the days my mother was not at home I could not stand being in the house. I used to go anywhere to escape from my thoughts. There were some people called Breton, who had bought many of my father's clothes. I told them during the lunch hour how impossible it would be for us to go on with the garden. M. Breton, his little boy on his knees, put in: 'But it's very difficult to get allotments just now. All the spare land is being built on. You're really very lucky.'

'We would be glad to get rid of it,' I answered, 'but there's my father's little summer-house. I would want a hundred francs for that.'

'A hundred francs,' repeated M. Breton. 'Yes, it is a lot of money. What do you think, Jeanne and Simon?'

Jeanne was his wife, and Simon the little boy on his knee. His wife said nothing, but the husband, putting his son down, opened a drawer and brought out a note. 'Really, Madeleine, would you sell me the garden for a hundred francs?'

'Certainly!' I answered.

'Oh, how happy I am!' he exclaimed. 'Here's the money. I shall go right away.'

Thus fell the last link with my father.

That evening I went to fetch my mother at the underground station. She looked very glad to see me, even proud, as if she liked people to know I was her daughter. I said I had sold the garden and the summer-house. She looked at me with admiration and exclaimed: 'Perhaps you'll have a good head for business? Who knows?' As soon as we arrived home my mother took off her mourning clothes and put on a lilac dressing-gown, in which rather old-fashioned colour she was still amazingly pretty. She seemed very pleased with her day's work, saying that her employer, Mme Laparge, had great quantities of silk and satin put by since before the war, which she was now anxious to utilize. They had spent hours inventing models for blouses and dresses, the rich materials massed on the dining-room table, Mme Laparge's two children doing their lessons in a corner. During the afternoon Mme Laparge's sister Yvonne had arrived. Yvonne, said my mother, was so beautiful that when she came

into a room one could hardly believe one's eyes. She had started life as a mannequin, now had a house, almost a palace, of her own, with cabinet ministers, millionaires, and maharajahs at her feet. My mother had been introduced to her, and Yvonne had asked her to spend the next few days at her house helping the maid to remake some curtains. To celebrate the event my mother had brought me back some cakes which Mme Laparge's cook had given her at tea time, and some snippets of material to make dresses for my doll, for in spite of being so nearly grown up I still played with the doll I had taken to Marais, to the Grand'Combe, and to Blois.

The next evening, eager to hear about the beautiful Yvonne, I went again to meet my mother at the underground. She arrived up the steps with Ulysses, Mme Maurer's son, who appeared even more sombre than usual. When we reached the street bordered by the cemetery wall Ulysses, pointing to the tops of the tombs, said in a deep voice: 'That's where I ought to be, Mme Gal. I can't go on living like this!' My mother was about to comfort him when we came upon a fine big woman cleaning the street with long rhythmic movements of a birch broom.

This was Mme Gaillard's sister!

We had passed her quite often without knowing who she was till one day we had heard her talking in Auvergnat with Léontine Valentin, and Léontine had introduced us. She wielded the birch broom as old Mme Valentin wielded the spindle or my mother the needle—expertly. Her semicircles were each of the same size to the fraction of an inch, and she produced a sort of lace fringe on either side of the road, using the water from the gutter to dampen her broom. She was affable. Her skirts were folded up against her wide hips, and there hung from her belt an enormous key in the form of the letter T with which she turned the water main to wash down the streets. She looked like a magnificent Flemish portrait, her blue eyes sparkling with fun and cleverness.

My mother's first day with Mme Laparge's sister had been quite astonishing—a magnificent private house behind the Étoile, where a butler had taken her into an immense linen-room. Here she had met Gracieuse, madame's maid from the Basque country, dark, with large black eyes and a lilting accent. My mother and Gracieuse were soon busy sewing. Madame was having all her

curtains redone, and for this purpose had bought several hundred yards of white tulle. Gracieuse measured, cut, and ran up the seams, and when each curtain was ready the footman came to hang it up. The walls of the linen-room were composed, from floor to ceiling, of glass cupboards, in which one could see madame's dresses, coats, furs, and *négligés*—all these masterpieces from the most famous houses in Paris.

After they had been working all the morning like two busy bees, a bell rang. Madame had decided to get up. Gracieuse glided from glass case to glass case, deftly lifting finely pleated lingerie, a dress, shoes, a hat, ran in to madame, hurried back, went off again with something else. Punch, a little dog with bells round its neck, arrived, looked at my mother, wagged its tail, and hesitated to come further. The servants hated it for the extra work it gave them, its silly paws making marks on the polished floors which madame never considered sufficiently shiny.

Gracieuse came in and whispered:

'She's in her bath, Mme Gal. We've a clear hour. I'll show you her bedroom!'

The bedroom was all white, with enormous mirrors, a pink carpet, and a wide low bed covered with hand-made lace. Everything smelt delicious, was heady like the heart of a beautiful red rose.

Gracieuse made the bed, then expertly started to tidy, looking closely at each new thing. In front of the dressing-table she exclaimed:

'That's funny! She had her pearls and her emeralds on last night—with that blue dress! Personally I'd have worn my sapphires. Well, I suppose, she can do what she likes!'

Gracieuse flew lightly from object to object, talking all the while, delighted to feel that my mother was watching her wide-eyed, listening surprised and full of wonderment at her chatter. 'Now give me a hand with the white bearskin rug. Madame rubs her feet into it, right as far as the animal's skin. Apparently it gives her a sensation!' She had one ear cocked in the direction of the bathroom just in case madame might be needing her. It was 'she' and 'her' all the time, and my mother was never quite sure whether it was from admiration or sarcasm. 'Now, Mme Gal, run into the little *salon* behind you and fetch her fur coat. You must take it down to the linen-room. It's a lovely coat, you

know, and so soft, though she has even better ones. But I must say I look beautiful in this one. Ah! It's heavy, isn't it? But wait till you try it on and you'll be surprised how light it feels!

My mother had taken up the mink in both hands. It smelt of amber, of wild beast, and of a woman who is happy and loved. My mother drew the skin close to her face and, shutting her eyes, breathing deeply, seemed to inhale a whole world that surprised her. Curiously she stroked the skin with its soft, dark, shining fur, which lay down obediently under her caress, but quickly sprang back with pride as soon as she removed her hand. It was as fine as her lace. The putting together of the many skins to make this sumptuous object had required the same sort of skill as had gone into her blouses. My mother had the admiration of one craftsman for the work of another. Gracieuse arrived, and seeing her in this trance exclaimed: 'My poor Mme Gal, if you go into raptures so easily we'll never get anything done!' She took the mink from my mother, bundled it on the table, and opening one of the glass cupboards brought out a squirrel cape. 'There!' she said. 'This is my favourite, and look at the adorable muff that goes with it!' She threw the cape over her shoulders, and asked: 'Don't you think it suits me?'

My mother said, with compressed lips: 'It's certainly a lovely cape.' She was never a person to pay compliments unnecessarily, and she thought Gracieuse merely pretentious. They went back to their sewing, and about an hour later madame arrived asking for a pair of shoes. She said good morning pleasantly to my mother, who remained once more overcome with admiration for this woman's strange beauty. Not a word could my mother utter. While Gracieuse was finding the shoes madame plunged her hands into the mountains of tulle, and my mother watched her white fingers, heavily ringed, playing in the soft whiteness of the billowing material.

'I'm going danting at Ermenonville,' she said. 'I shall be back at three. I shall only just have time to dress. Please see that everything is ready. And, by the way, if M. X telephones tell him that I'm lunching with Mme d'Antin. Good-bye, Gracieuse. Thank you for coming, Mme Gal.'

She was gone in an instant, leaving a trail of perfume right through the house.



Gracieuse sighed deeply.

'Well, that does give us a breathing space. Let's go and see if the cook has got lunch ready.'

In a light and spacious kitchen Maria, the cook, a Basque like Gracieuse, was rattling pans on the range whilst talking to 'fat John,' the footman, a lumbering Bourguignon peasant. He had been chosen by madame because he looked so honest, but nothing cured him of his heavy gait and thick accent. He rubbed, polished, swept, and generally did the heavy work, and was occasionally sent to the front door when the butler was anxious to get rid of an unwanted caller. They had just sat down when the good-looking Marius, madame's chauffeur, arrived back from Ermenonville. Olive-skinned, big eyes, and a dazzling smile, he looked magnificent in his black uniform. Maria and Gracieuse dreamt of winning his heart—Maria made him special dishes which she served him herself, bending over his shoulder so that her face brushed his cheek. The conversation, which had creaked somewhat when 'fat John' was the only man, now became a duel between Maria and Gracieuse, stories about madame to excite his interest, intimate details which made my mother blush, about madame and her lovers.

Over coffee Marius said nonchalantly:

'Oh, you know, if I were willing . . . but I never have liked these over-washed and over-scented women. There's such a thing as exaggerating cleanliness. A female should have a female smell. Do you get me?'

Gracieuse and Maria, momentarily allied, smiled at each other. They were each a point up. My poor mother, very flushed, looking down at her cup, thought: 'Is it possible? Could any man not want *her*?' To hear a woman so magnificently beautiful discussed, undressed, sullied, trodden under foot by a chauffeur revolted my mother who, by class solidarity, should have been on his side; but my mother was never proud of being poor. Her one idea was to climb out of the trough.

Maria was saying disdainfully:

'When I was cook at the Comtesse de — that was another matter, but of course with people like *her*'—and she jerked her head in the vague direction of madame's bed—'it's different, isn't it? Any man who is rich enough can have her. She's really only a prostitute. And there's another thing. With real ladies

you don't need to worry so much about the tradesmen's bills. One can make a sauce with two dozen eggs. They're not a bit surprised. They've known that sort of thing all their lives; but with these ex-officers' daughters, who five years ago had to save every penny . . . do you get my meaning, Mme Gal?

'The same here,' said Gracieuse. 'Do you suppose anything ever comes my way with all her poor relations? She gives all her dresses to her sister's little girl. The family has no money at all. You can't have any admiration, can you, for somebody who was as poor as yourself?'

'Poorer,' said Maria.

'And doing what she does!' exclaimed Marius. 'Why, I reckon there's not much difference between that and walking the streets——'

'Filthy!' said Maria. 'Some more coffee, Mme Gal?'

'Still, in September we go to Biarritz,' exclaimed Maria, pushing back her chair. 'That's something.'

Back in the linen-room Gracieuse unhooked madame's dress and ironed it. A parcel had just come from the dressmaker Jenny. She undid the paper, opened the long white box, and drew out from folds of tissue-paper an afternoon dress made of cherry-coloured satin. Her critical eye examined it and she said: 'She'll look stunning in that! Now I wonder who it's in honour of? She was starting to put it away when the front door bell rang. John could be heard opening, and a moment later madame called for Gracieuse. In less than half an hour madame, dressed differently from head to foot, went off, driven by the good-looking Marius, to a *thé dansant*. From this amazing day my mother brought me a pair of silk stockings which Gracieuse gave her, pearl-grey as the fashion then was. They were the first I had seen, and I wore them on Sundays.

At last I had something to talk about at the office. The four Maréchal sisters almost fainted with envy. Their favoured position seemed to them ridiculously trivial. Disenchantment stole into the heart of Arlette, the beautiful eldest, who began to treat M. Piétry with less regard.

My mother gradually recovered from her first surprise, and when she went back to the Motte-Piquet Mme Laparge, measuring and cutting the *crêpe de Chine* on the dining-room table, talked freely about her sister.

'She's happy enough for the moment, but when she was a young married woman her husband chose the ugliest women in Paris to be unfaithful to her with, and gave her such thrashings! She has certainly got her own back on men since then!'

'And is the husband dead?' asked my mother.

'No, alas, very much alive!' answered Mme Laparge. 'He goes to see her sometimes, and we are all so very afraid she will go back to him. People are so curious, aren't they? Luckily we have a grand ally. She's quite crazy about dancing, and I think that keeps her mind off her husband. It serves our purpose in other ways. She looks in here occasionally between a tango and a fox-trot. Then on Sunday nights she comes for dinner. She simply adores a stew but, of course, she couldn't ask Maria to serve her one because the servants would think she was being stingy. Stews are absolutely not possible when one has servants and a situation to keep up. None of her friends would dare admit they like anything so cheap. So here, every Sunday evening, we have the family stew and my sister Yvonne is as happy as a little girl, and we are just as glad to have her with us.'

My mother and Mme Laparge talked endlessly in this way. M. Laparge, of very humble stock, had passed all the hardest examinations, and now occupied a very high post in the senior naval college. He was one of those French technicians who think merely in terms of examinations, and was tutoring his eight-year-old son to follow in his difficult steps. Their little girl was not pretty, but her ambition was to become a *demi-mondaine* like her aunt. As she was exclusively dressed in her aunt's lovely things, which my mother soon learnt to arrange, it was presumably difficult for her not to think along these lines.

Mme Laparge had a slight limp. The family had been coming home by underground from a circus one evening when Mme Laparge, imagining that her son had been left on the platform, rushed out after the train had started, and broke an ankle and an arm. Her children had, of course, been quietly sitting with their father in the compartment. This accident had tired her heart. Though only thirty she was beginning to feel the first pangs of disenchantment. Her middle-class existence with a husband who was affectionate but neither good-looking nor rich and, in her opinion, a bore, made her increasingly envious of her sister

Yvonne. In fact we all began to consider Yvonne as the one person in the world we would like to be.

There were apparently lots of cousins with places in the country who invited the two sisters for week-ends, and as M. Laparge urged his wife to go in the hope of seeing her get better, my mother's chief business was to make a wardrobe for these country visits. Even when Mme Laparge was away my mother went to the house to sew and look after the linen. When M. Laparge was there my mother would make his lunch. He would say: 'A steak without sauce, if you please, Mme Gal. Why do people put rich sauces over their food? Animals would not thank you for a *Béarnaise* with their pieces.'

On these occasions he would often arrive reading a letter from his wife.

'My poor Mme Gal,' he would exclaim, 'do listen to this.' He read a few lines from the letter. 'To think that at her age she cannot even make her participles agree! A mistake in spelling makes me ill for the whole day. It's so easy to write correctly, and yet it's extraordinary how few women can write a letter in French. Do they think that the rules of grammar should be changed twice a day like their hats and their dresses? Women will never know how to write. A female is a female, Mme Gal, and nothing will ever change that. And all this slang! The word *chic*, for instance, and silly phrases like the *dernier cri*! There, my poor Mme Gal, my wife has made me all upset!'

My mother, afraid to say a wrong word, served the steak and kept silent. But she watched him with interest. Fair, insipid, blue eyes with a slight squint, his features lit up when he spoke, and yet he bored his wife. Now that she was away all his conversation was about her. He must have loved his wife very much—yes, in spite of her spelling and the fact that he thought all women rather silly. My mother, who perhaps would have been happy with such a husband, was touched by his eagerness to please.

When Mme Laparge came home he was overjoyed, but she, on the contrary, dreaming of pretty things, feminine things, was sullen. She said it tired her to climb the stairs, to order the meals, and to look after the children. 'Mme Gal,' she would say, 'you do it for me.'

M. Laparge blamed much of this on his sister-in-law, the lovely

Yvonne. He remembered that when Yvonne had been unhappily married it had been he and his wife who had appeared the happy ones, whereas now . . .

'Oh!' he would exclaim, 'how I hate these odious comparisons! Why are women never satisfied?'

One day when my mother was queueing for a ticket on the underground a young woman wearing a plain but impeccably cut tailor-made edged up and asked if she would buy hers at the same time. They met several times after this, and my mother and she would do part of their journey together.

The holidays were beginning. M. and Mme Laparge and the two children were to spend a month in the château of an old aunt. Mme Yvonne was preparing to close her Paris house for the usual stay in Biarritz. Gracieuse having gone for a week to her parents just outside Bordeaux, my mother took her place. She came home quite miserable. My mother, with me continually in her mind, had certainly become as jealous as everybody else of Yvonne's brilliant life. At the end of the week, when Gracieuse came back, my mother gave her notice, and she was walking rather dejectedly to the tube when she met the friend for whom she had taken the ticket.

'What are you doing?' asked the young woman in the grey coat and skirt.

My mother told her all about Mme Yvonne, and how depressed she was at the thought of finding a new job in August.

'I'm just back from New York,' said her friend. 'I was manicurist at the Ritz-Carlton, and now I'm doing the same thing at the Hotel Crillon. Lots of my New York customers come to ask for me here, and as they don't know their way about Paris they take my advice on almost everything. One never can tell. I might be able to help you. Come to the ladies' hair-dressing at the Crillon to-morrow, and ask for Mlle Joubert. If I don't turn up immediately you'll know I'm with a customer, but I won't keep you waiting long. Good-bye, Mme Gal.'

When my mother arrived home that evening she found me in bed with a high temperature. I had not lunched properly since my mother started work, eating all the things that are bad for a delicate digestion, like gherkins and cold ham. For a few days I was seriously ill, the doctor warning me that I must take care;

but as he knew in saying it that I was too young and flippant to be reasonable when my mother was at work, he ended by patting me on the shoulder and adding: 'Thank goodness, you're young. You'll quickly get over it.'

My illness did not prevent my mother from going to her appointment. She had brushed her clothes with great care, and left me in bed with Émile Zola's *Bonheur des dames*, and my imagination quickly turned our room into a vast store full of rich brocades and ladies in Second Empire crinolines. I forgot all about lunching in this exquisite dream.

When my mother came home that night she told me that Mlle Joubert had introduced her to two American women who were looking for somebody to alter their dresses. In those days Paris fashions were much slower to cross the Atlantic or even the Channel. These two young American women had arrived with lots of dresses which were charming in New York but ridiculously out of date in Paris. They were heart-broken, saying that the shortness of their dresses made people look at their strange clothes and not at their faces. They were so pretty that normally they should have received many compliments.

The two young Americans and Mlle Joubert had an animated discussion in English. Then Mlle Joubert, acting as interpreter, explained all the details to my mother. Several trunks of dresses were to be urgently altered. Some would be cut to pieces to lengthen the others. Occasionally my mother would suggest something by signs, and then there would be cries of enthusiasm.

The two women had a large room and bathroom on the fifth floor. My mother would sew alternately in the bathroom or the bedroom, both rooms full of dresses.

One of the women was tall and fair, the other was small, chestnut, extremely quick in her movements. Miss Sarah was the tall one. She seldom spoke to my mother. She smiled a welcome, smiled through all her numerous fittings, smiled her pleasure and approbation, and jumping into the nearest of the twin beds was soon fast asleep like a child. My mother had been very shocked at first to see this beautiful creature walking completely naked about the apartment, but gradually she became accustomed to the pure lines of this living statue whose voice she seldom heard. Miss Amy would come in almost hidden by the boxes and parcels she had bought. She talked incessantly to

anybody about anything, with the result that every hour she added new words to her French vocabulary. She would be quite worn out after these long shopping expeditions, but her eyes would glisten. Paris had got into her system. She breathed it, felt it, adored it. She would hurl all her packages on the bed on which Sarah was sleeping, and then give her a fierce shaking.

'Hi! Sarah! Wake up, it's wonderful!'

Sarah yawned, stretched her lovely limbs, and sitting up in bed would stroke the things Amy had brought back. Then Amy would run to my mother and say:

'Mme Gal, you simply must have Miss Sarah's blue dress ready for to-morrow night. Come early in the morning. Don't worry if we're asleep. Just make yourself at home and start to sew.'

Her French was not always of the best, but the words gushed out. Women have a sort of Esperanto when it comes to dresses and hats. The dictionary is quite inadequate. A ribbon or a length of muslin was to make a flounce, a piece of pink satin was to line a skirt, a lovely lace would become a tunic. Everything was clear, and the three women understood one another perfectly.

Towards five the languorous Sarah began to wake up. She took a bath, then sat quite naked at her dressing-table to do her hair. Putting the curling iron on an electric heater, she would proceed, wisp by wisp, till it seemed that her entire head was covered with tiny snails. She now made herself up and dressed with the slow deliberation of a woman at ease with her beauty. When she had put on her necklace, her rings, and her shoes, which she did with remarkable velocity, these things having been timed and calculated in advance, she would take a comb, and with short, quick, almost brutal movements shake out her little snails till her hair stood out in rays above her head like a golden sun.

Miss Amy put on an evening dress, and soon the two young women went off to dine and to dance in the Parisian night. The valet and the maids came to do the apartment, arrange the bed, put clean towels in the bathroom, and exchange a few words with my mother, who was tidying her needles, the cotton, and thread. Then finally my mother would go to the mirror where an hour earlier Miss Sarah had made herself so beautiful, and put on her black hat with the long black veil, comparing her tired, sad, and anxious features with those of the young and pretty American.

Now she left the hotel with a Paquin bandbox containing one

of Miss Sarah's dresses to be run up on the sewing-machine at home. I always waited for her at the underground. The light, gay hat-box made a curious contrast against the blackness of her widow's weeds. As soon as we were home I used to plunge my head into this cardboard box, knowing there would be some snippets for me. We would have something light to eat, and I would oblige her to come with me to the circus which, at this time of year, took possession of the Place de la République.

The next morning my mother went back to the Crillon. The maid let her in with a pass key. She went silently into the bathroom, took off her hat, which she hung next to the white bath wrap, and stole on tiptoe into the bedroom to fetch her work. Miss Amy murmured from under the sheets: 'Good morning, Mme Gall' turned, and went back to sleep.

At midday my mother went to the little market behind the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, bought some fried potatoes and a few cherries, and, retracing her steps along the rue Boissy d'Anglais, turned right, and sat on a bench under the chestnut-trees of the Champs-Élysées, to share her lunch with the sparrows. An hour later she hurried along the thick carpeted corridor of the Crillon to the apartment, where the two young Americans were just starting to take an interest in life. They were drinking orange juice, followed by black coffee, and offered my mother a cup. Miss Amy dressed and went off in search of a ribbon or a piece of material. Miss Sarah dozed, tried on a dress, and dozed again till it was time to have her bath and curl her hair. After which, if the new dress was to her liking and she found herself pretty in it, she would blow a kiss to my mother like a little girl proud of her Sunday frock.

My illness had been quite serious. The doctor said that I must stay at home for a while. Accordingly my mother brought me home work in the Paquin bandbox. Once, when she was busy elsewhere, I was obliged to take a finished dress to the Crillon. The rue Royale seemed truly regal that evening, and the small page boy who took me up to the fifth floor in the lift, seeing me so wonder-struck, told me, to increase my surprise, that the gentleman with the white hair I had bumped up against was Mr. Lloyd George. Secretly I was hoping to find Miss Sarah and Miss Amy naked. They were both dressed, ready to go out, happy, extremely friendly. I hurried back into the street, paused to look



at Maxim's. Night was falling, an elderly man spoke to me, frightened me, and made me run. My joyful expedition was rather spoilt, for like a rabbit I dived underground. Yet I was proud, very proud to be a young woman and to have been spoken to in the street.

That evening we received a letter from my Aunt Marguerite. She was coming to see us, arriving at Saint-Lazare the very next day. As my mother was working she told me to meet her. The only indication she gave me was that my aunt was very dark with blue eyes. My mother appeared to think that this combination was so rare that I should be able to pick my aunt out in the largest crowd. I arrived at the station feeling very uneasy. Most of the women wore wide grey coats and large comfortable shoes. Searching amongst the seemingly unattached women I saw one, still young, dressed entirely in black, with blue eyes. I advanced and queried: 'Aunt Marguerite?'

'Ah! My little Madeleine,' she answered. 'The last time I saw you you were three days old. It's thanks to me you're called Madeleine. I was so indignant when your mother wanted to call you Matilda that I thought, anything but that.'

'In that case why specially Madeleine?'

'A cousin with whom I was in love jilted me for a Madeleine.' She smiled.

'Where's your mother?'

'She's working. She couldn't come in time to meet the train, but she said that if we waited a moment she would do her best.'

'Then let's sit on a bench and wait.'

My Aunt Marguerite intrigued me. I rather liked her confidences. She went on, referring to the cousin who jilted her:

'Yes, it was a bit because of that I went to England, feeling like crying and not speaking a word of the language. The funny thing is that now, after fifteen years over there, I feel a stranger here. Do you think I've an accent?'

'I think you have, Aunt Marguerite. Perhaps it's the way you say things?'

'Possibly. Ah! there's your mother!'

## 19

THEY really were very much alike. The same height, extremely slim, pretty legs, but with that sad anxious look which gave them a not very amiable expression. One felt with my Aunt Marguerite, as with my mother, that the quick sarcasm was never far behind.

They kissed each other with pursed lips, still somewhat on the defensive, called a porter, and off we went after him in search of a taxi. I was enchanted by this unusual form of travel. We climbed to the Place Clichy, sped along the avenue, and passing through the toll-gate at the fortifications, bumped over the quick stones of Boulevard Victor-Hugo.

All the women of our street were leaning out of their windows to see Mme Gal's sister from England. There was a murmur of excitement as we drove up in the taxi. My poor aunt looked a trifle disconcerted, but her surprise turned to consternation when we took her up to our apartment. The scantily furnished room and kitchenette must have seemed a terrible come-down after her semi-detached villa in Beckenham. She looked round and said softly:

'My poor Matilda, I never imagined you were as poor as this!'

My mother was vexed and said proudly:

'There are lots of people much poorer than we are. There's Mme Gontrel, for instance, who even when she goes with Riri to Paris doesn't wear a hat. Besides, we haven't any debts!'

The two widows put their identical black hats with the black veils on my mother's bed. My aunt's luggage took up most of the bedroom. She was looking round, wondering what to say next, when Didine arrived with the most elegant leather bootees between finger and thumb.

'My friend of the rue Fontaine has made them a tiny bit on the short side,' she said to my mother, after a neighbourly smile to my aunt. 'I thought Madeleine would like them.'

My mother saw my enthusiasm.

'Try them on,' she said.

They were magnificent! The suppleness of the brightly coloured leather was a real joy. I blushed with contentment. Here I was half-way to the wide velvet hat. Just think of it! I was going to wear smart leather bootees like Didine, and my feet were smaller than hers. My heart thumped with happiness.

'Thank you! Thank you, Didine!' I said.

Her gesture struck me as even more magnanimous than the rum omelet feasts when I was younger. She laughed and said to my mother:

'Madeleine has always admired my bootees even before she was grown up. I wouldn't have liked anybody else to have them. By the way, Mme Gal, could you possibly let down the hem of a coat for me? I bought it from a friend. It's a very pretty model, but a trifle short.'

'Of course, Didine.'

'And you know, Mme Gal, I expect things are a bit hard for you just now. I'd love to help. I know lots of young women who need a good dressmaker. Well! It's getting dark. I must go off to work. It's a shame to think summer is nearly over, isn't it? I see there are oyster booths outside the cafés already.'

She looked round, obviously put out by my aunt's iciness. Then to me, still in the heaven of delight:

'The coat's with the doorkeeper. You'll go and fetch it, won't you, my little Madeleine? It's really so sweet of your mother to do it. Well, I must rush. Good night, Mme Gal, good night, madame. So long, Madeleine!'

As soon as she was gone my aunt looked up from a port-manteau she was unpacking and asked rather dryly:

'And what does *she* do for a living?'

'Oh,' said my mother, 'she's one of those awfully nice girls that do a bit of everything. You know what I mean?'

'I'm afraid I do. I notice you move in the most curious circles. I hardly think they can have a very good influence on your daughter unless, of course, you want her to do a bit of everything.'

'Don't be such a prude!' snapped my mother. 'Since Émile died life has been pretty tough, and it's a good deal thanks to a woman who is kept in a big way that Madeleine and I haven't

starved. Oh, I'm not saying I've done marvels, but if it hadn't been for making dresses for *demi-mondaines* I just wonder where the rent would have come from! The trouble is that Madeleine is still too young and I'm not young enough. That's why my needle is at the service of anybody who appreciates it and can pay for it!

My aunt was a bit shaken.

'I didn't know it was as bad as that,' she said in a less antagonistic voice, and not daring to look my mother in the eyes. 'You should have told me.'

'Some people have their pride,' said my mother. 'With you I went as far as I dared.'

The next day, on her way to work, my mother met Mlle Joubert in the tube. The two young Americans were apparently delighted with what she had done for them. Miss Sarah was a Hollywood starlet; Miss Amy was a trapeze artist. As they both had many friends in Paris they were having a gay holiday.

Mlle Joubert was the daughter of a former member of the Clichy fire brigade, who had been pensioned following an accident; he had, I think, fallen from the top of a ladder when a wall collapsed. The family lived in a tiny house with a garden near the Seine, and Mlle Joubert invited my mother, my aunt, and me to take coffee with them on Sunday.

The place proved delightful—pretty, clean, and well furnished. Mlle Joubert had obviously contributed most of it, and it was nice to see how she loved her parents. The fireman's leg was amputated below the knee, the trouser leg being fastened back with a safety-pin and the stump fitting into a piece of wood which narrowed off into an iron circle that echoed when it touched the floor boards. Mme Joubert was large and perfectly happy. Her only fear was that her daughter might go back to America. My Aunt Marguerite and Mlle Joubert discussed life in London and New York, and M. Joubert, tired by female conversation, stumped off to plant his cabbages.

As soon as he was gone Mme Joubert began to talk about fortune-tellers, saying that her daughter's journey to New York had been clearly foretold. My mother described how Mme Garnier, the bone-setter at Blois, and Léontine, Mme Valentin's daughter at St. Ouen, had both predicted that she would soon be a widow, and that I should go to England and become famous.

While she spoke Mlle Joubert, sitting by the window, would peep through the net curtain at her father going about the garden on his steel ring, and her eyes were full of affection. Suddenly she said:

‘Yes, mother, you’re quite right. They told you I would go to America; but though I’ve lived in New York and now work in the heart of Paris not a single man has ever asked me to marry him!’

Mme Joubert looked at her daughter who, at thirty, was still pretty and fresh, and answered:

‘On the very next Friday 13th I’ll go and consult Mme Speller.’

‘How very strange!’ cried my mother. ‘Mme Speller lives in our street. I didn’t know she was as good as all that though, I do remember she told me I would soon be a widow.’

Actually this Mme Speller was married to an assistant at the Magasin du Printemps, and lived on the same floor as Didine. Quite a number of women used to visit her on Friday the 13th.

My Aunt Marguerite, who had remained quietly in a corner, now said:

‘I had a niece staying with me at Beckenham who used to tell my fortune with a pack of cards. I’ve never seen so many spades. It was spades every evening. When Matilda wrote to tell me that Émile was seriously ill I thought: “Well, that explains it. My brother-in-law is going to die!” Every evening the cards looked worse. Then one night my young niece, Matilda of Graçay, said: “What’s certain is that Matilda of Clichy is a widow by now!” Two days later we received the letter with the black border. It sounds cruel, but we gave a sigh of relief. We expected after that to see plenty of diamonds and hearts in the pack. Not a bit of it! There were as many spades as ever, night after night. My poor little niece hurried back to Graçay, thinking her parents were ill, but no, it wasn’t that. On 21st April, six days after she had gone, my husband had his stroke and asked me for a bottle of ether screwed up in a heavy container to prevent evaporation, but though it was always in the same place, I simply couldn’t find it. Seconds were going by. I lost my nerve and panicked. While I was still looking—in reality I had my eyes on him all the time—he stretched out a hand to pick up a book and died. Well, the other day when I

was packing up to leave the house that ether bottle fell from its shelf and, hitting me on the head, knocked me unconscious. I'm wondering if it was trying to kill me for not having found it in time. I must go and consult that Speller woman. There'll be no more spades, that's certain. I've lost the only man I loved, but I'd like to find a journey in the cards. I want to see new faces, new places.'

MY aunt returned to England in the autumn and almost immediately wrote for me to join her. She was selling the house at Beckenham and winding up the estate, but some Armenian friends had offered to put me up. Mr. X, the husband, was staying in an hotel in the Champs-Élysées, and he was to take me to London by the Dieppe-Newhaven night service. I left my mother in tears. Only now do I realize how cruel this parting must have been for her.

I was extremely intimidated by Mr. X, but on the boat I met another girl, and we went on deck together. The night was magnificent. The moon was reflected in the inky water, and English seamen sang *Tipperary* and *Whispering*, which we all knew in Paris.

When at last we reached Newhaven, after showing our passports and passing through the customs, and were going forward, tightly packed, towards the waiting train, a little grey cat demurely sitting on its tail looked at us from between railings. Mr. X put his suit-case down and stroked it. Several other people did the same thing. The little cat stretched its neck out as if expecting and enjoying these marks of friendship. Mr. X said:

‘Now, my little Madeleine, anybody can see that we’re in England. The English love animals.’

I was touched and charmed. Then when we were in the train, which seemed so very small, we drank tea which was excellent. We reached Victoria soon after five in a thick fog, which made the night even denser. Mr. X put me in a taxi. We crossed the Thames, and suddenly I remembered a song we used to sing during the war:

Tout le long de la Tamise  
Il faut aller tous les deux  
Goûter l’heure exquise  
Du printemps qui grise.

The fog leered at us, hanging over interminable streets of low houses. After about twenty minutes our tall black taxi stopped in front of a semi-detached villa similar to hundreds of others we had passed. Though it was not yet six Mr. X's children, Tatiana and Boris, were already dressed, waiting for their father.

Tatiana, all black stockings and child's short dress, was a few months younger than I. Boris was twelve, with the prettiest face and deep grey eyes. They kissed their father deliriously, and helped us to take the luggage down a narrow dark staircase to a basement.

Here, by a gay fire, sat a woman no longer young, but quite beautiful, turning the handle of a coffee-mill. She would give it a dozen rhythmical turns, pause without removing her fingers from the handle, take part in the conversation, then, having said what she wanted to say, give a little laugh and begin turning again, her nostrils sensuously inhaling the aroma of the ground beans.

This was Mr. X's sister. Everybody called her Aunt Pia. She kissed her brother, exchanged a few words with him in Armenian, and went on grinding. The children prepared some coffee for their father in a tiny copper pan and then, at the top of their voices, called out for their mother.

Minoche, as her husband and her children called her, was a small Parisian woman who had been so long in England that there remained nothing French about her but the language, into which she put a great number of English words and expressions. Quick in her movements, dark, and with the same deep grey eyes I had noticed in Boris, thick lips, and small head, she was the best of women.

I quickly settled down in this strange family.

Minoche adored her husband, who was always disappearing on long business trips. Aunt Pia thought Minoche stupid for letting her husband so often out of her sight, but she told her this in the most affectionate way, and when her brother went off on an expedition she comforted Minoche by talking about him, especially of their childhood in Armenia. At last Minoche would sigh and object:

'That's all very well, but it doesn't alter the fact that he's gone off on another business trip!'

Aunt Pia would answer testily:



'Listen, Minoche! You're frightfully lucky to have him at all. I can't tell you how many times we were nearly all massacred by the Turks. Then you *would* have had something to cry about!'

'Perhaps,' agreed Minoche, who had heard this argument a hundred times and was always touched. 'It really is dreadful—about the massacres, I mean. How could people?'

Aunt Pia went on turning the handle of her coffee-mill, or if it was tea time she would make toast at the end of a long fork of twisted wire. She only went out of the house to go for a journey, to the Pyrenees, for instance, where she had an adored nephew, the son of a dead sister. When she had been there long enough, or quarrelled with her brother-in-law, she came back to Brixton, resuming the tenancy of the wicker arm-chair which the cat occupied in her absence. In the evening, taking as many hot-water bottles as she could lay her hands on, she went to her room on the second floor, where she carefully brushed her long grey hair and, calling the cat, wound herself up in a thick blanket like a mummy. The cat jumped up on the bed, chose the place he liked best, and soon both would be fast asleep.

The children went to school. They were up early, rushed to the front door, where the milk bottles were lined up like little soldiers, and fought for the *Daily Mirror* to follow the adventures of Pip, Squeak, and Wilfred. Then Tatiana made the tea and cooked the porridge.

I saw little of my aunt, who was still busy selling her house. My new life was charming. We all did exactly as we pleased. Tatiana practised her drawing when she was supposed to be peeling the potatoes; little Boris, who was musical, composed a symphony long after he was supposed to be in bed. Minoche and Aunt Pia and my Aunt Marguerite, when she was there, gossiped endlessly in the basement, whose warmth and soft gas-light, its smell of coffee and toast, and its large table which took up nearly all the room, made it charmingly cosy. We each had our place at the table. Aunt Pia's was nearest her wicker chair. She kept a large box of coffee grains on it. Tatiana had a box of paints; her brother a book. Minoche and my Aunt Marguerite had piles of mending, into which they dived at random. I sat demurely making one of the embroidered petticoats which my aunt seemed to think I should possess by the dozen, being hopelessly out of date in her ideas. These petticoats oppressed me.

They were so different from those my mother garnished with Mme Gaillard's precious lace or from the orange *crêpe de Chine* and black net favoured by my good and pretty Didine. None of us ever wanted to go to bed, our bedrooms, which were quite at the top of the house, being cold and damp. When at last we went up my head was deliciously full of stories I should not have listened to—confidences exchanged between the three women, sometimes enlivened by some massacres by the Turks and, if her husband happened to be gone away, by fresh tears from the unfortunate Minoche.

My Aunt Marguerite sold her house, and told us she was going back to France to live with a branch of my mother's family at Tours. As she did not want me to go with her I was to be put in a convent at Tooting.

The morning before my departure I went with Tatiana as far as her school, but on the way back I lost myself amongst streets which all looked exactly alike, and was obliged to ask the help of a policeman. He ended by finding the right house, where my Aunt Marguerite, Minoche, and even Aunt Pia were on the threshold in much alarm, thinking I must have been run over or kidnapped. The policeman was warmly thanked, and my aunt laughed at me, but Minoche said:

'There's nothing to laugh about, Marguerite. The same thing often happens to me. When one isn't tidy, tidy things like streets that look all alike put one off.'

I nodded approvingly, knowing exactly what she meant.

## 21

AUNT MARGUERITE and I waited in the parlour, where the parquet floor was polished to such a shine that two pieces of felt matting for the feet lay in front of each cane-chair. At the end of the room there was a grated partition with tiny windows. A veiled sister arrived. One of the windows opened with a metallic click. After a few words my aunt went off through the door by which we had come and I followed the sister into the unknown.

As it was five o'clock I was taken straight into the refectory, where I was placed between two young English girls, who were kind to me, but finding I spoke so little English they soon left me to myself. The big room with its many long tables was gay and noisy. Then suddenly Sister Aimée de Jésus, standing by the fire-place knitting long white stockings, called for silence by a sharp rap with the clapper. After grace we went silently and in tightly packed rows to a study where we again had the right to talk, but after a while a sister came to fetch me. I followed through many airy passages to a box-room where my trunk, which had preceded me by Carter Paterson, lay open and emptied of its contents. Sister Odile—it was she who had come to fetch me—had made neat piles of my linen. She showed me where to hang the dress I would wear on Sundays, and I was given a number for my dressing-gown. Then returning to my trunk, Sister Odile said in quite a kindly voice:

'You may now take your personal things—your sewing-case and your photographs—but I must warn you that in this house we do not tolerate your Bible. I am sorry that your aunt did not think it necessary to tell us you were a heretic. That we should be established in a heretical country is not our fault. It pains us to find this in a French girl. That, I must admit, was most unexpected.'

The Bible, in which our clergyman at Clichy had written, after

my first communion, when he had kissed me paternally in memory of my father, was put by Sister Odile at the bottom of the empty trunk. The lid was closed, and I was marched out of the room, shown my bed, and taken back to my companions.

Several girls had arrived earlier in the week from France and Belgium, and we immediately exchanged confidences. Most of them had already earned a living, fought morning and evening for room in the underground, brought up younger brothers and sisters, and been introduced rather too early into the mysteries of life. There was a tall girl who spoke French with the strong Parisian accent which is the counterpart of cockney in an English girl. A Polish girl of weird brilliance, who was later to become famous as a painter, said that she was accustomed to discipline, the Poles being alternatively dominated by the Germans and the Russians. A Greek girl laughed innocently, not yet understanding a word of French or English. I did not share the initial revolt against obedience and discipline, and I foresaw the possibility of learning more than one modern language at the same time as Latin and Greek.

Sister Joseph, banging the clapper, sent us back to the refectory, where we were given twenty minutes to eat supper in silence—three plates grouped in front of each chair. The first generally contained a stew, the second apricots or prunes, and the third a slice of bread with margarine. After this meal and Sister Aimée's prayer, we got ready for bed, first kneeling in a vast circle round a dust-sheet cleaning our shoes under the critical eyes of Sister Odile, who stood in the doorway telling her rosary.

There was no time to dawdle. Our shoes finished, we put on slippers, washed, and undressed in the required way, slipping our night-gowns over our petticoats, without putting our arms in the sleeves, so that under this tent-like protection of stiff calico, fumbling and perspiring, we could modestly pull away the rest of our clothes. Sister Odile, meanwhile, would be reciting:

'Saint Joseph.'

Whereupon we, heads covered up by night-gowns, would answer:

'Pray for us.'

Then when everything was put away, the taps turned off, and the light switched off, we would go to bed, Sister Odile retiring to her cubicle surrounded by tall white curtains. She would

continue to recite her prayers a little while until gradually the dormitory fell asleep. The heavy tram-cars clanging across Tooting Broadway threw splashes of coloured light against the little white beds. From time to time one of the sleepers in the middle of a nightmare would sit up in her bed and call for her mother. Then Sister Odile, looking like a ghost in her long white garments, would calm the child, and all was quiet again. I cried a little the first night, but chiefly I sent up a feverish prayer asking to learn English as soon as possible.

This order, expelled like the rest from France, had brought its own beds, and not till I had a house of my own did I ever find their equal. The mattresses were stuffed with wool from sheep in the Auvergne, for the nuns nearly all came from the province of Mme Gaillard and Mme Valentin. In the morning Sister Odile emerged from her cubicle, clapped her hands, switched on the light, and began the first prayers. We dressed under our night-dresses, made our beds, and went down to mass.

The sisters attended holy communion every morning. One saw them in two files, one on the right and the other on the left of the nave, led by the mother superior. Hands together, thumbs joined, their black veils drawn level with their eyes, they arrived in front of the tall latticed screen separating the altar from the rest of the chapel. Then in twos, one from each file, they knelt to receive the sacrament, after which, eyes closed, in ecstasy, they returned silently and in perfect order to their stools. One of the sisters then gave us the order to leave. As we marched out I would look back for a last picture of these black veiled figures bent low in prayer. Then joyously, because we were cold and hungry, we would rush to the refectory, where milk and coffee was already served.

Our class-rooms were speckless and smelt of beeswax. The desks and the floor were polished till they shone like glass. We knelt on the long benches for prayer. During our religious instruction we had a right to sew or to knit. Sister Edwina taught us in English and French with equal grace. Another sister arrived, intoned a prayer, and gave us a lesson in mathematics. This went on all day. Every time a new teacher came into the room we began with prayer, but the sisters taught with remarkable clarity, and I made swift and delightful progress. At the end of a month the most stubborn began to feel the advantages

of this regular, cloistered life with its superb teaching. We were too closely watched for the pupils to inflict the small miseries on each other that are inseparable from secular education. All our energies were put into learning and prayer. The tall Parisian girl with the strong accent, who on our first meeting had sworn she would get the better of the nuns, now dreamt of taking the veil; and though, personally, I remained true to the Protestant faith, I felt as my mind expanded that I was at last building up a personality of my own.

My mother wrote to me occasionally. She had gone back to Mme Laparge and Mme Yvonne, to Mme Yvonne especially, where she had been obliged to bend to the minuteness of the work, learning under the direction of Gracieuse. She had not perhaps realized, when my aunt sent for me, that I should be away for a number of years. She could not realize that the time which seemed so long to her was providing me with a rehabilitation and a profound, unhurried education which later would set me along quite different paths. I think she was even sorry for me, thinking back to her own sad experience with the Ursulines at Blois, an experience which, at heart, I envied.

Mme Yvonne had a new lover, not, of course, an exclusive lover, but just an extra laurel to her wreath. He was a tremendously rich business man, a factory owner from Lyons, who gave her sumptuous presents but broke everything in the house. She was quite panicky each time he announced his arrival, and always tried to drag him quickly out of the house into restaurants and hotels, where what he broke was less important. He claimed that by these spells of violence he got out of his system a nagging wife, tiresome relations, and the appalling stiffness of provincial life. Generally he came once a month, spent a fortune, then when his nerves were quietened went back to Lyons. He broke one of Mme Yvonne's rarest pieces of Sèvres, for which he gave her a cheque for twice its value. Gracieuse thought him charming, and so did Maria, the cook, but the lovely chauffeur Marius said he was no gentleman.

Marie Guillet, tired of learning music, had gone to work in a factory, and the neighbours said she had a young man. They had been seen kissing under the shadow of the fortifications. Dédée Gontrel had been accepted by the ballet school at the Paris Opera, but poor Riri had gone to the hospital for incurables, and

Mme Gontrel, obliged to work, was employed in a newly opened cinema in the Place des Fêtes.

Marguerite Rosier and Hyacinthe had left the street. Mme Malgras and her husband, the former baker, were finding it impossible, owing to all these devaluations in the franc, to live on their savings in the little country house to which they had retired. Hyacinthe had thought about the matter carefully. He would not give them money. This would have jeopardized his own little hoard. To give up the apartment at Clichy and go and live with the old people in their cottage might help M. and Mme Malgras, and even save Hyacinthe some money, if the fare up and down every day wasn't too expensive. He worked it out on paper and decided to leave Clichy. After all, the cottage would go to Marguerite when the parents died. Keeping it in running order was really money in the bank, money like gold, which would not become less valuable after each new devaluation. So they went. Marguerite Rosier disappeared out of my mother's life. Hyacinthe went clop, clop, clop, down the street for the last time. It was all rather sad.

There was a lady near the convent who once a week invited two French girls to take tea with her. To go there was considered a great honour, a reward for having been particularly good.

We went without a sister, and this charming person welcomed us in the prettiest drawing-room, where tea was served by a very smart little maid. We tried very hard to make suitable conversation, but very soon the lady, seeing our distress, opened a drawer and showed us the table-cloths and napkins she had embroidered at different times during her life. They were quite magnificent, and Mme Gaillard would have loved them; but the important thing about them was that each cloth or napkin represented a journey in some distant part of the world, or a phase in her amazing existence. This one, for instance, had been begun in Italy and finished in Madrid. This other one had been made while sailing round the Cape. The last stitch was done at Cape Town. As she showed them to us fascinating stories came to her mind. She described a hot afternoon when seated elegantly on a long chair she threaded her needle with this pretty blue silk while listening to a distant orchestra playing a waltz. She described palm-trees, a veranda overlooking a blue lake, a house in Japan with

a snow-capped mountain in the distance. I began to have that taste for geography which had been so long in coming. She would send us back full of dreams and a home-made cake.

As my time at the convent came to an end I began suggesting to my mother that as life was so hard for her in Paris she should come to London. A particular friend of mine, a girl of my own age, invited me to spend Sunday with her mother, a very successful dressmaker in Soho. This Mme Monnier promised to look after my mother and give her enough work to keep her busy till she could build up a business of her own.

Towards the end of my last term my mother wrote to say that she was coming to explore the idea, and that as she was to lodge in Old Compton Street I was to ask for three days' leave to be with her.

These three days proved a real dream. We ate buns in the park and watched the people in evening dress going into the theatres in Charing Cross Road and Shaftesbury Avenue. This was my first view of the West End. My mother and I both fell in love with it at first sight. The Soho street market with the bananas, oranges, and pineapples filled us with wonder. She said:

'You're quite right. Let's live here permanently. It's not even taking a risk as we've got nothing to lose.'

She quickly went back to Paris, sold everything she could, and arrived a month later with two trunks full of clothes and all that was left of Mme Gaillard's precious lace.



MY mother worked for a short while with Mme Monnier, gradually adapting herself to life in London. She had found a single room on the second floor of a house in Stacey Street, some fifty yards from where the Phoenix Theatre now stands. She was thus on the fringe of Soho, merely separated from Old Compton Street by the width of Charing Cross Road. Here the traffic flowed fast like a river with the lights of the Palace Theatre scintillating with musical romance.

At the end of my term at the convent I was longing for the picturesqueness and excitement of the West End. My mother and I were both convinced that we had left our cares behind us. I thought our room delightfully furnished. Titiche gave us a bed. We bought a divan for me on the instalment plan, which we put up against the window. During the day I sat on it to sew, to read, and to day-dream. The mattress was very hard compared to those at the convent. With its dark wood frame it looked rather like a cage for a wild animal, but it was my domain and I loved it. Grey linoleum covered the floor. A common deal table took up nearly all the middle of the room. My mother used it for her sewing, to iron on, and to cut materials. At meal times we pushed her work away from one of the corners and set out the crockery on a dish cloth. She still looked amazingly young, and for the first time had a happy confidence in the future. Everything was so deliciously new and we were starting our new existence with £40 in the bank, my mother's savings whilst she had worked alone in Paris.

I did the shopping in Seven Dials. There were so many sausages that one might have supposed that Londoners ate nothing else. I heard myself for the first time called 'dearie' by costerwomen wearing black satin hats strongly attached to hair yet unbobbed with great hatpins topped with coloured glass. Vegetables and fruit on barrows splashed the grey streets with

greens and reds. Canterbury lamb hung outside the butchers' shops lit up at night by acetylene flares. There were tomatoes and oranges out of season. Provisions in Paris were not so easily within the reach of people with little to spend.

My mother not working on Saturday afternoon, we would then do our shopping in Soho, where one heard every language, especially French and Italian, finding the specialities of the various countries, even smelling them as one passed such restaurants as *Le Petit Riche*, *Le Restaurant d'Italie*, *Molinari*, *Genaro*, and the *Rendezvous*. In the shops long-necked bottles of Chianti hung in dark cool corners over barrels of black olives and gherkins. Foreign newsagents, café-bars where coffee was made in the French way, cutlers where the kitchen knives came from Nogent, shops that specialized in aprons and tall white hats for chefs, having a wax model in the window dressed up and with black upcurling moustaches and pink cheeks, Italian hairdressers, a coffee merchant from *Le Havre*, Belgian pastry-cooks—these gave Old Compton Street a dashing cosmopolitan air. Groups of women holding shopping baskets laden heavily with food, as if they were going home to a siege, gossiped on the kerb, young men in bright pullovers discussed boxing and bicycle racing as at Clichy, dressmakers from Baker Street and Paddington came to fetch the Paris fashion magazines.

We bought our coffee from *Mme Sandret*, who had a curiously picturesque shop at the end of a dark and narrow passage. Heavily built, her hair done up tightly and neatly in a bun, her dress always made bright with beautifully white collars, pearls, or a coral necklace round her thick neck, she roasted the coffee while one waited, and tied up the bag with amazing speed and dexterity. We used to say to her: 'Don't bother to put any string round, *Mme Sandret*. We've only a few yards to go.'

'It's on account of the name,' she answered. 'I couldn't have it not looking neat while you carry it.'

The name SANDRET printed obliquely across the bag was a cult with her. She looked after her husband, who spent all the profits, with equal devotion. This excellent woman became my mother's first customer, and soon she began to speak so highly of my mother's talents that many of her customers became customers of my mother who, leaving *Mme Monnier*, bought a sewing-machine at *Selfridge's* and set up on her own. We also, because

of the mice that overran our room, acquired a black cat called Nanny, who slept on my bed and became a most affectionate companion.

It was now that my mother, who bought her fashion papers from a Frenchman called M. Marcel, who owned a tiny but famous newspaper shop in Old Compton Street, heard that he was looking for an assistant. M. Marcel told her he wanted a girl, lively and pretty and sufficiently inexperienced to accept a small wage for long hours. His wife had her eyes on me, and stressed the advantages of working in a shop where the door was open all the time—indeed there was no door at all, the premises being closed at night by a steel curtain. She pointed out how good this would be for my health, and what a satisfaction it would be to my mother to talk to me each time she passed along the street. I started work the following Monday, being paid fifteen shillings a week, and for several months had enormous fun selling the *Vie Parisienne* and *Le Matin* to the curious crowds who came in from Old Compton Street.

Not long after this a friend sent my mother a new customer called Mme Néroda, a manicurist, who visited in their flats the French girls who at night grouped themselves on the pavement in Bond Street and Jermyn Street plying their age-old profession. Mme Néroda's husband, who was a hairdresser, specialized in the same clientele, and between them they made a great deal of money. She quickly persuaded my mother to make dresses for these women, many of whom were of amazing beauty, and one day when I was complaining how little I earned, she said:

'Why don't you do something else? Take up my profession, for instance? To begin with it's such fun for a young girl to *talk*! You'll meet a great many different people. That's wonderfully useful. Look at me, for instance! With my little manicurist's box I've been to Shanghai and to New York and to Rome. I've made plenty of money. It was as a manicurist that I met my first husband, a very wealthy business man. When he died I took my little manicurist's box again and found a second husband, not so young, less important, but that will come in time, for every year we are getting richer. It's quite simple really. The great thing is to keep a little book, and take care that at the end of each day you have spent less than you have

earned. Besides, it's amusing. One ends by turning it into a sort of game.'

I left M. Marcel's paper shop to work at the *Galleries Lafayette* in Regent Street. My mother and I began to make money. We had practically no expenses except food, stockings, shoes, and materials. Everything that could be sewn, lingerie, dresses, coats, and hats, we made ourselves during the long winter evenings under our gas lamp. Her new and specialized clientele paid well, and to supplement our income I did some translations. I continued to read widely both in French and English, and hearing so much Italian spoken round us in Soho, and being angry with myself for not understanding it, I began to learn that.

The franc had been devalued three times since my mother's arrival, but instead of being sorry about the financial straits our poor country was in we used joyously to work out what our savings were now worth in French money. We had never been so rich. We replaced the linoleum by a carpet, which we ordered from the *Magasin du Printemps'* warehouse at Clichy, where M. Séguin had worked; and as in those days one could trade freely between the two countries, our carpet cost us less than if we had bought it in London.

I had been rather impressed by Mme Néroda's advice, and as I was to have a fortnight's holiday in August I suggested to my mother that we should go to Paris, where I could take a course at a beauty institute. We had a money-box, in which every week we put something towards the journey. My mother was all the more anxious to go because for the first time in eight years she had received news of her sister Marie-Thérèse and Rolande. Rolande had written me a short, awkward letter, not quite sure if my mother was yet ready to forget the far-off quarrel which had kept us so stupidly apart; but though the information was of the vaguest, my mother, who really loved her sister, was alarmed. Marie-Thérèse had apparently twice been to hospital for a serious operation. Rolande herself was not well.

A week later my mother who, though extremely happy had been very tired, fell ill. I was then with Gaumont. Without daring to ask for leave I nursed my mother, and did a great part of her work in addition to my own. I shopped during the lunch hour, made her lunch, ran up the hems of her dresses on the machine, and in the evening when there was anything to deliver

to a customer I would take it round. Several times a week I went to flats in Jermyn Street and Bond Street, where the walls were decorated with pictures from *La Vie Parisienne* and *Le Sourire*. Coming out into the dark streets groups of women under lamp-posts, nearly all knowing me now, whispered good night sympathetically. I thought them pretty but cruel, and I envied their large painted eyes under bright felt hats, their slim figures draped in mink, and their very high heels.

At the end of six weeks my mother could walk round our room. The first strawberries were being sold on the barrows in Old Compton Street. The bookmaker who ran his business from the dead end of our narrow street was busier than ever. Any stranger put him immediately to flight, but when he had seen a person once he always remembered the next time who it was. Our neighbour, the wife of a cook, backed two or three horses every day, and put her winnings in a box towards the trousseau of her daughter Adrienne. She slammed the front door, looked quickly to right and left, and hurried to the bookmaker to collect her money. Just before the Derby a strong man, whose companion tied him up in chains, began to operate in our street. This performance embarrassed the bookmaker, who used to retire dejectedly into the pub till his rival had gone.

My mother was much better, and though she was not yet strong enough to go up and down the stairs, we were still determined to spend our holidays in Paris. Mme Néroda, meanwhile, sent us two new customers, who arrived one day when, in spite of the heat, I was in bed with a heavy cold. Of these two women one was clearly more important than the other. Putting down her Pekinese, who immediately made friends with Nanny, our cat, Mlle Thémiers walked round the room, explaining her requirements to my mother in a strong Bourguignon accent, whilst her friend sat rather stiffly on a chair. Mlle Thémiers, from beginnings no less humble than Didine, had been fortunate enough, soon after her arrival in London, to find a rich banker, who had given her a house near Park Lane, a small farm in the country, and a large white motor-car, which had sent our bookmaker scurrying away. My mother soon discovered that she thought of little else but putting enough money aside for her old age. Her idea was to buy some cheap models in the stores, have my mother alter them, and then, when her banker had a party,

pretend she needed £60 to buy a dress at Patou or Worth. My mother pointed out that it took a great deal of time to adjust a dress, and that it was too ill paid to be worth her while. I suppose my mother's eyes turned to me while she said this, because Mlle Thémiers, to win her heart and mine at the same time, promised to send round a suit-case full of brocades and satins, which had been sent from Lyons to her friend the banker to show to English and American buyers. Some very lovely materials had arrived for the same purpose. Would my mother be willing to turn these into dresses?

This was quite a different proposition. My mother relented, and we watched the two women through the window leaving the house. By this time a crowd had formed round the white car with the uniformed chauffeur at the wheel. The car and the chauffeur returned later with the promised suit-case, and my mother showed the same skill in turning these beautiful satins and brocades into dresses as she had shown with the lace for Mme Gaillard's blouses. Mlle Thémiers, delighted, brought me several rolls of superb blue and orange ribbon, knowing that the best way to please my mother was to please me. All this contributed to my mother's convalescence. July was half over, our plans for Paris were becoming more definite, and my mother made me a lovely dress with Mlle Thémiers's gift of ribbon—a wide skirt of pleated *crêpe de Chine* finished off most prettily at the bottom with a length of the ribbon. More of this same ribbon went to make the corsage, which had short sleeves and a little bow under the chin. Nothing in the world could have been more graceful for dancing, for running about, for taking to Paris for a fortnight's holiday! This was my dress for important occasions. I had others which my mother made from the bits and pieces left over from the dresses of her Bond Street and Jermyn Street customers. I was very dissatisfied with office life. My head was full of Rudolf Valentino, Pola Negri, Mae Murrey, Norman and Constance Talmadge. I was all for taking Mme Néroda's advice.

All the young women at the office were having their hair cut short. First it was one department, then another. On a Monday morning we would see them arriving with hats no longer poised on rolled-up buns, but stupidly, amusingly bumping over a void. The slightest movement would turn these

rudderless hats round. The bit of fur on the coat collar rubbed against freshly shaved necks full of hard bristles and not yet toned down by air and sun. Each new victim was taken to the ladies' cloak-room to be examined. We were not sure whether we liked it but we knew that our turn would come. My mother kept on saying: 'It's really too great a shame!'

One evening my mother's friend Emma arrived gaily at our second-floor room with a box of cream buns from Valérie. She was of about the same age as my mother, freshly made up on this occasion, a new hat of the prettiest kind from under which two curls emerged, clinging to her cheeks like question marks. She looked younger, her head moved gracefully as if lighter, more airy now that it was freed from the usual multitude of hairpins. She let us admire her, turn her this way and that whilst she stood at the table undoing the box of cream buns, Nanny playing with the string, waiting to catch the crumbs full of sugar. My mother was quite won over, and we were all very happy. Emma, who was waitress at the 'Pop,' always informed of the latest gossip, brought me some money for several handkerchiefs in *crêpe de Chine* I had made to her order. They were of gay colours with a girl with bobbed hair wearing a *cloche* painted in a corner. A swan's-down powder-puff was sewn to the middle of the handkerchief, and Emma disposed of them with ninepence profit on pay day when the waitresses were changing from their uniforms into their own clothes before going off duty. Every kind of important transaction took place at this well-chosen moment, and when Emma told me about it I used to think of our adventures in the public wash-house at Clichy.

On the next Saturday, having lunched quickly, my mother and I went to a hairdresser's in Wardour Street, where we sat at the end of a long queue of women who, like us, were patiently waiting to let down their beautiful long hair and have it murderously cut off with a few cruel snips of the scissors. When it was my turn my mother lost heart. She raised her voice, spoke with unaccustomed loudness, and kept on opening her bag to look inside, as if wishing to remain blind to the crime.

An hour later, with hats far too large for diminished heads, feeling very self-conscious, anxious to be home where we could make a minute, pitiless examination of our changed appearance,

we went down the narrow, steep staircase into Wardour Street where, across Shaftesbury Avenue, the Saturday afternoon street market in Soho was at its busiest and most picturesque.

Celestine was a curious little woman who, though French, had lived so long in London that she could not speak three words of her own language without adding two of English. She was small, sprightly, and of no known age. I had seen her for the first time when selling newspapers at M. Marcel's shop. Both in summer and winter she wore the same black plush coat, turning a horrible shade of green from long wear, not unlike those favoured by the last of the flower-girls in Piccadilly Circus. Her hat, equally discoloured by age and weather, fitted her head in a way that made one suppose she never took it off—the front was smooth like her forehead, the back protruded, covering her bun, forming an excrescence like an oak-apple. She lived in a small room at the very top of a sordid house facing Middlesex Hospital. The women of Bond Street and Jermyn Street would send for her if their maids fell ill or had to go away to Switzerland or Belgium, for she was admirably versed in their difficult and specialized work. She also kept *en pension* these ladies' Pekinese, and was occasionally invited to supper by them in return for telling their fortunes. As all her front teeth were missing she used to lisp like a little girl, with the result that her most awful predictions, the blackest calamities, fell from her lips in an absurdly childish voice. Her short arms, imprisoned in the plush coat which she refused to take off because of the filth of the clothes she wore underneath, moved so awkwardly that when shuffling the cards one or two generally fell face upwards on the table, whereupon she would exclaim in a tone of surprise as if she had seen a butterfly flying upside-down: 'Why, yes, it fell, but you know the saying, don't you, everything that falls on the ground comes true!'

Placing the fallen card, or cards, on the right heaps, she would continue:

'One, two, zee, ze widow. One, two, zee, ze dark zung man. One, two, zee, I zee ze postman. Of course I can make a mees-take, but zat's what I zee!'

Celestine often came to our place, and when my mother was ill she had told me how to deliver the dresses to my mother's



customers. There was never anything very sensational about her predictions concerning me. They ran like this:

'One, two, zee, un zeune homme. One, two, zee, a nouveau zob. One, two, zee, a voyaze.'

As she spoke she would fondle Nanny, who loved her. Everybody confided in Celestine. She listened to what one told her with sympathy and emotion. There were moments when she looked on the verge of tears, but as soon as she left one's presence everything was forgotten. Secrets just flew out of her head. She was thus incapable of an indiscretion. This system had only one disadvantage, for occasionally when somebody poured out into her ear some story of unrequited love or money not paid back, she would exclaim:

'Zen I tell you what to do! Zere ees nothing like a good smack to calm ze nerves!'

'You really think so, Mme Celestine?'

'Yes, of course. It calms ze one zat gives as well as ze one zat receives!'

A moment later she had forgotten all about the incident, and would be quite surprised when her customer would stop her in the market and say:

'You know that smack you told me to give her, Mme Celestine? Well, it didn't calm her nerves a bit. Look what she did to me!'

Now at last my mother and I were off to Paris. We were to cross by the night service on a Saturday. During the afternoon, having put our dear Nanny in a basket, I set off for Mme Celestine's attic flat opposite the Middlesex Hospital, where Nanny was to lodge during our absence. Sleek and black, with a white front which made her look like a young woman barrister, I could see her through the osiers, hear her heart beating every time the omnibus came to a noisy stop. The journey seemed very long. At last, having carefully carried the basket up the narrow stairs and cautiously opened Mme Celestine's door, I came upon a hovel the floor of which was strewn with saucers of milk of varying freshness. Through a wide-open window stretched a vista of roofs. Cats came and went, and could be seen stalking on the sky-line. As soon as Mme Celestine crumpled a piece of grease-paper scores of them, their tails up, galloped over the tiles, jumped lightly through the window, purred, and arched their backs as they rubbed against her legs. Nanny, released from her

basket, appeared full of surprise, and then darted under Mme Celestine's bed. Lifting up the flounce we could see eyes shining in the dust and darkness against the wall. Mme Celestine called out wheedlingly:

'Come, my petit cat chéri, zere ees some poisson fried. Viens, pussy dear, zere ees also some bonne cat's-meat!'

Nanny, being herself bilingual, was not slow to emerge from her hiding-place and taste the fried fish and cat's-meat. I gave Mme Celestine five shillings for Nanny's lodging, left her the basket, and hurried down the stairs, my nostrils filled with the terrible smell of fried fish and curdled milk.

My mother, having finished packing, was now emptying all the cupboards while her friend Emma sat on my couch.

'Give me a hand with the carpet,' exclaimed my mother as I opened the door. 'It will be safer to roll it up.'

'Safer because of what?' asked Emma, swinging her short legs over the side of the couch.

'The mice,' explained my mother. 'On account of Nanny not being here.'

'So you really think,' asked Emma, 'that the mice will eat up your carpet in a fortnight's holiday? Anybody would think you were going to your château for the season!'

'The carpet came from Clichy,' said my mother reflectively. 'It's rather a special one.' But she was struck with the truth of Emma's remark, and said: 'Yes, I suppose we can leave the carpet, and in any case it's time we fetched a taxi.'

Emma offered to fetch the taxi, which could drop her at the 'Popular' on its way to Victoria. She went ahead of us while we drew the curtains, made sure the gas was turned off, and had a last look round. We took down our suit-cases and, finding no sign of Emma or the taxi, began to be impatient, and then increasingly flustered as all our neighbours, putting their heads out, passed loud remarks. As it was Saturday night our bookie was there with a long queue of punters. A very old taxi wheezed its way down Phoenix Street. The door opened, swung on its hinges, and Emma made frantic signs at us, crying out that unless we hurried she would be late to 'clock in.' She had to be at the restaurant in time for the dinner shift. We retorted angrily that we had supposed that the idea of fetching a cab was primarily to

allow us to catch a train. The bookie was annoyed at the commotion in his street, and the taxi driver was rattling his vehicle backwards and forwards in jerks to turn into Shaftesbury Avenue, where the theatre traffic was at its busiest. We got in and pulled the door, closing it with such a bang that the glass shook in its frame. Our driver, to avoid the congestion in front of the Palace Theatre, tried to turn left for Trafalgar Square and the Mall, whereupon Emma, rising from her seat like a terragant, brought down her knuckles on the glass partition between driver and passengers, shouting out in a mixture of English, French, and her native German-Swiss:

‘Mais, donnerwetter, silly fool, I must pass au Pop for clock in!’

We all started to talk at the same time; the cab driver, suddenly understanding, swerved in the right direction. Then my mother and I, amused by the outraged expression on Emma’s face, broke into laughter. Our cab had no sooner turned round the statue of Eros in Piccadilly Circus than Emma, kissing us good-bye, rose in the still moving taxi to struggle with the door in her eagerness not to waste a moment. The driver put on the brakes, and our poor Emma was thrown into the arms of the magnificently uniformed commissionaire of the Pop. Her chubby Swiss cheeks pink with confusion, she slipped past him, and we saw her rushing round to the employees’ entrance.

Now we were relieved, though almost surprised, by the stillness in our taxi. Quietly, in plenty of time, we turned down St. James’s Street, past the wooden-looking soldiers in their bearskins and crimson coats, and a quarter of an hour later, not quite recovered from so many emotions, we took our places in the night mail for Paris.

It was five in the morning when we emerged from the Gare Saint-Lazare. We had been given the name of a tiny hotel in the rue Vivienne, between the vegetable market and the bourse, where for sixteen francs we could have an attic with a clean bed and running water. Leaving my mother in the taxi with the suitcases, I ran up several flights of private flats to the top of the building where, at the end of a corridor, I found a glass door with some keys hanging from a board. A woman, having thrown a dressing-gown over her night-dress, came in answer to my ringing,

and asked me disagreeably what I meant by waking her so early in the morning, but noticing my youth and confusion she became much more friendly, and gave me a key which I hurriedly took down to my mother. We washed and tidied our hair and my mother unpacked our dresses, which she hung up in the wardrobe. I persuaded my mother to go out again. A church clock struck six. 'Oh!' she cried, suddenly vexed, 'that's just like you! We could have had a good sleep!' I began to hang my head down when suddenly a fine smell of coffee and buttery *croissants* greeted us, and after an excellent breakfast in a café-bar we saw the steel shutters being thrown up in front of all the small shops. Housewives hurried past with newly baked bread. Church bells rang gently, and a bright sun warmed the suddenly busy street. We promised ourselves a complete rest all day, no cooking, no washing up, no *crêpe de Chine* handkerchiefs for Emma, no opening and closing the door for Nanny, no dresses to be hurriedly finished and taken round to flats in Bond Street and Jermyn Street. At midday we lunched in one of those small restaurants where evergreens line the pavement—*bors-d'œuvres*, leg of lamb and French beans, a Camembert and ripe peaches from southern vineyards, with a carafe of *vin rosé*, all served on crinkly paper on which, after coffee, the waitress pencilled the bill.

We followed the crowds moving slowly along the boulevards. The men with black suits and black hats seemed fatter and smaller. We thought the women amusing, but the streets less imposing than when we used to come up from Clichy and gape at the Boulevard Haussmann. Oxford Street with its throngs was still in our eyes. In the evening we went to the Casino de Paris, and on our return at midnight we quickly went to sleep.

The next morning the sun came out again, and Paris, with its thousands of foreigners, scintillated. I had left Clichy in a depression. I had returned to France in the middle of a boom. The first thing was to find a school where I could learn hair-dressing and manicuring, and about this we had no trouble. We came across just what I wanted near the Pont Neuf, a wide, dark staircase leading to an office where a young woman in a white blouse assured us that in twelve days I would know enough to be employed in the most exclusive establishments, as hairdresser or manicurist, in Paris, London, or New York. We left the place full of hope, and went joyously to the perfumery department of

the Magasin du Printemps where my mother, still so very young, examined lipstick and powder-box, scent and eau-de-Cologne, with an enthusiasm no less than mine. All these things were displayed in the prettiest manner. How good they smelt! How attractive to the eye! One took up quite the most charming object, looked at it a moment, then quickly put it down for another that seemed even more desirable or more original. Women on these occasions are as fickle as men who, seeing a woman, fall in love with her, are proud to be seen with her, then lay her aside to pass on to the next. Curiosity, a fear of having missed something good or of making a wrong choice, sent us hurrying from counter to counter. We had no sooner made our purchases here than we ran to the artificial flowers, and from there to the gloves whose minute stitches are not sufficiently appreciated by their wearers, and off again to the handkerchiefs, poised like butterflies ready for flight. Glass lifts ran up and down. One could see right through them. Delicately shaped they looked like flowers with a golden stem, the calyx full of women whose coloured hats emerged like pistils. English, Americans, and Scandinavians were everywhere.

We took a taxi to go back to the rue Vivienne, discussing what we had seen, saying over and over how wonderful it was to have just enough money to buy frivolous, useless, pretty things, and when in our hotel bedroom we undid our parcels my mother was quite changed by a happiness out of all proportion to our real situation; for, after all, we were not yet so brilliantly set up, but since we had gone to live in London she had a complete and touching faith in the future. She was convinced that she had left the bad times behind her. Clichy was synonymous with illness and poverty. She watched me growing up much better in health, animated, very gay, and with an assurance that she had lacked at my age. She believed I was capable of conquering the world. And at that time I may have thought so myself.

After lunch we took a taxi and told the driver to take us to the rue de Longchamps. My mother was anxious to see her sister Marie-Thérèse alone, and she knew that Louis would be working in the afternoon.

QUICKLY passing the doorkeeper's lodge, the long narrow corridor seized us with its sudden cold after the sunshine in the street. We climbed flight after flight of backstairs till at last, at the sixth, my mother timidly knocked with bent finger at her sister's door, then, placing her ear against the panel, listened. After a while, hearing footsteps, she drew herself up and knocked more loudly.

A slim woman appeared, and was beginning to ask us what we wanted when she suddenly exclaimed:

'Oh, Matilda, fancy, it's you! It's dark in the passage, and I was sitting by the window sewing some white material, so I didn't recognize you immediately. And there's Madeleine! Come in, both of you, do. Nothing has changed in the flat except the people who live in it.'

She went swiftly ahead, and we followed. No, nothing had really changed since that August in 1914 when I stayed here; only in a room through which we passed with two doors but no window, lit merely by a skylight, which was Rolande's bedroom; her bed, which I had shared on many occasions, she sleeping with her head at one end and I with mine at the other, was now pushed into a dark corner, obviously not for the moment in use, and quite covered over with dusty bandboxes.

My aunt, going to her own room, sat by the open window, the same window through which I so nearly fell trying to see the soldiers with their band on the declaration of war, and arranging her skirt round her skinny ankles took up the white hat she had been making when my mother rang. My mother was terribly affected to be in the presence of this sister from whom she had been alienated for so many years. We had last seen her so very young and frivolous. Now she was unbelievably thin; her beautiful brown hair had turned grey, her sweet irregular face, that used to be so full of charm when she was happy, was ruffled with deep, tragic lines.

She put a ribbon round the crown of the white hat, made a stitch or two, broke the cotton, and placing the hat on her fist twirled it round.

'There!' she exclaimed. 'Thank goodness this one's finished. You'd never believe the trouble it's given me. Oh, these rich, mean women! I was supposed to copy exactly the model from Maria Guy—the one on the table—but to do that I should have needed to match up the materials, and it simply isn't possible. All the famous modistes stick tight to their own materials. I have to run round the shops and get second best. Then when I'm home I close my eyes and hope that having opened them I shan't see the difference between the original and the copy. I may as well tell you right away, it's no good. One can't compete with firms like Maria Guy. The manufacturers pander to them, make materials exclusively for them. Oh, the lovely models I've made in my imagination! I, Marie-Thérèse! Well, I've never made those masterpieces and never shall. My hats have been a mess. My whole life has been a mess. Of all the hundreds of hats I've made there's not been one outstanding enough to get itself talked about. No newspaper has even photographed one of my hats at the Grand Prix. It's terrible to be a failure.'

My mother, who was gradually mastering her emotion, put in: 'Come, Marie-Thérèse, what's the matter with you? Your hats have always been quite charming. You never took yourself so seriously before the war.'

'That's true,' answered my aunt sadly, 'but things were very different.' She laid the hat on the table next to the one from which it was copied, and said more gaily, turning to me: 'Suppose you run down and buy some *croissants* and some *brioches*. Your mother and I will get coffee ready in the kitchen.'

When I came back I found them talking round the kitchen table. Marie-Thérèse took a *croissant*, ate a few crumbs, and said:

'There, that's all I can manage, and yet I assure you, Matilda, I was ravenous. It's such a wonderful thing to feel hungry. To think there are women who, to keep slim, refuse to eat. The poor fools! To feel hungry is to be healthy. Fancy wanting to fight good health! Supposing they were like me! Supposing they were afraid to die at any moment!'

My mother began to look a bit serious, and said:

'What's come over you, talking about dying at your age?

You're as bad as when we were children at Blois. Do you remember how you used to wake me up to recite prayers in the middle of the night?'

'When I wake up now,' answered Marie-Thérèse, 'it's to exclaim: "Heavens, what pain I'm in!" and to take half a dozen aspirins.'

'I think you exaggerate,' said my mother. 'Lots of people have operations and get quite well again afterwards. I expect it's the after effects.'

My aunt, having rinsed the coffee cups under the hot-water tap, was not putting them away very carefully. She said affectionately:

'Let's go next door. Louis will be back at any moment and I wouldn't like him to see me looking sad. He has enough troubles, what with my being ill and Rolande in a sanatorium.'

'In a sanatorium?' queried my mother, not quite expecting that. 'Tell me everything. She gave us no details in the letter, merely that she herself was not well.'

'Rolande,' began Marie-Thérèse, but as she spoke a key turned in the front door and Louis came into the passage. He was followed by a young woman who turned out to be a lady's-maid come to call for the hat Marie-Thérèse had just finished making. She said she would bring another to be copied in the morning, and went off. Louis welcomed us and then, kissing his wife with the greatest tenderness, asked:

'How is my darling to-day? I swear she's looking a great deal better!'

He pinched one of her cheeks as if she had been twenty, and was altogether so loving that one felt a lump in the throat. He asked us about London, and then said:

'Go ahead! Gossip to your hearts' content! I'll go and fetch something good for dinner and an old bottle of Burgundy.'

As soon as he was gone Marie-Thérèse said to my mother:

'You see, Matilda, he hasn't changed a bit. He's just as loving as the day he married me. His goodness, that's what makes me less brave to face another operation. Can you understand?'

'I understand that you're so happy you want it to go on for ever,' answered my mother. 'Not having been very happy with Émile I suppose I suffered less than those who were happy. It's a tiny consolation!'



I was rather shocked to hear my mother say she had not been happy with my father. Since we had lost him he had taken a more important place in my heart. I only remembered his kindness, the sunny part of his character, and I much preferred his southern brusqueness, even his moments of violence, to the sugary talk of Uncle Louis when he was with women. The conversation turned for a few moments to my father's death, and to all the other people in the family who had died during the last ten years, to my granny, for instance, who, after living as a recluse in the old district of Blois, had died all alone in 1922, probably dreaming to the end of adventure and pieces of gold. Then Marie-Thérèse, who had the gift of turning abruptly from one subject to the other, looked at me and exclaimed:

'It's amazing how your daughter still has her straight hair and her fat cheeks!'

My mother, springing to my defence, answered:

'How can you talk such trash, Marie-Thérèse. She has the cheeks of any healthy girl of twenty. I certainly wouldn't have them any other way. As for her hair being straight, I don't see how that can matter with this new permanent wave.'

Were the sisters so soon to have a new quarrel? Happily the conversation turned on dress, and then to my aunt's illness. She was to have yet another operation.

'You mustn't mind too much what I say,' put in Marie-Thérèse hastily after another sharp volley inspired by something my mother said about my aunt exaggerating the seriousness of her condition. 'It was yesterday at the hospital. I came back quite shaken.'

My mother, sitting very primly on her chair, arched her eyebrows inquiringly.

'I was on the couch being examined. A very famous woman doctor turned round suddenly to the medical students round her, and asked: "Well? What have you got to say?" I couldn't see their faces. I'm so tired of being pommelled in public. I hate them. I bit my lips and closed my eyes. The woman doctor's voice rang out again. "I say it's a waste of radium," she said, and went off and left me, followed by her disciples. You laugh at my prayers, Matilda, but He would not have left me without putting His hands on me and healing me. What did the woman mean? Did she think my tumour had

grown so much smaller that it wasn't worth while wasting radium on it? That it would go down by itself? Or with this other operation? You know how famous doctors aren't really interested in a case unless it's out of the way or frightfully serious? And she obviously wasn't interested any more, was she? Otherwise she wouldn't have gone off so quickly with her disciples?'

There was a pleading in my aunt's voice. My mother looked down at her shoes. She did not really understand. In our world people went to hospital and either came back or died there, but people knew less than they know now. Suddenly my aunt broke out:

'You don't believe I'm exaggerating any more, do you, Matilda? Not now, you don't? You don't think the tumour is any better? They give one radium to heal one. Why didn't she want to heal me? Aren't I worth healing? When I came home I threw myself on the bed and cried and cried and cried! I'm surprised at the amount of tears I can well up. I cry when I'm alone, but as soon as Louis comes home I smile and make plans for our future. I almost believe all the nonsense I talk. He's so very kind is Louis. But at night, when the pain gets the better of the aspirin, I turn away from Louis, with my face to the wall, and cry again till I fall asleep.'

She went on:

'I dream mostly of Blois. The military bands and our mother whose apron, when she came home, was full of nuts and apples. You remember the stories she used to tell us about washing linen on the Loire? Then I dream of Rolande playing with the goat at Marais, and of Rose, who was always waiting for her distinguished German lover to come back. Once I dreamt of our convent at Blois. I was sliding on the parquet floor. But it's funny, I never dream of you or of Louis. It's specially funny about Louis, isn't it? In the morning, when I'm having breakfast, I wonder how I can have been so happy in my dreams without him. I don't think I could really be happy without Louis.

'I've got to go to hospital again to-morrow. I really don't know what they do to me or even why I have to go. I wait there with a crowd of women of all sorts of ages. I know they've got what I've got, just as they know I've got the same as they have. Some of us are quite friendly. We've known one

another for at least six months, and we try to see if we look any different—I mean, if the illness shows at all on our faces. Sometimes one or other of us doesn't turn up, and then we guess. We have such a long time to talk. Think of it, it's nothing to wait for two hours! The amount of secrets I know! Some go to church a great deal, or even go to Lourdes. Others go to fortune-tellers, hoping to be told things like: "Next year you and your husband will retire in the country," or "You are going to start a new life. I see a legacy coming your way." Obviously the deduction is that we have more years in front of us. And really, Matilda, between you and me, I don't think my tumour is of the serious kind. They say that when one has been loved very much the body is so much healthier. It's understandable, isn't it? It's wonderful to be loved like I'm loved by Louis. Well, I don't need to tell you that. You saw it just now with your own eyes, didn't you?'

I twisted on my chair, wondering how much longer this horrible conversation would go on. A pigeon came down on the window-sill and looked at us curiously. My aunt, picking up a piece of straw from the carpet, frightened the bird away, and soon a sparrow flew down and took its place. I went across to the window, remembering the declaration of war in 1914 and all the women who cried, but they cried differently to the way my aunt was crying now.

Suddenly my Uncle Louis arrived, telling us about his adventures and all the wonderful things he had bought for dinner. Saucepans soon sizzled on the fire. My uncle and I laid the table. He pulled the cork out of the Burgundy bottle with a bang. He was very gay.

**R**OLANDE was not happy at school. My Uncle Louis, who would have given her anything in the world, quickly saw that her real interest was plaiting and twisting bits of Italian straw and garnishing hats with vaporous tulle. He therefore called on all the great modistes in Paris and was successful in placing her as an apprentice, at the age of fourteen, with the great house of Lewis in the rue Royale.

She was delighted. She hoped, of course, to start making hats immediately, and was disappointed to discover that apprentices were used mostly to run errands, being sent out to match up materials in the shops or simply to fetch aspirins or *croissants* for the workwomen. When she was breathless from running up and down tall flights of stairs she was told to pick up the pins on the carpet. Occasionally, on busy days, she would be allowed to finish a lining or sew on the tab with the name 'Lewis' to the inside brim, but all the time she was looking at what the others were doing, and when they forgot her for a few moments she would make something on her own. Her very first attempts caused surprise. She was unconsciously creating. Lewis at that time made hats for the stage. Many of the greatest actresses in the world went there. Unusual ideas were therefore acceptable. A fancy, a whim, a caprice, could help the success of a revue or a musical comedy. What more staid houses might have frowned on made money for Lewis. At the age of fourteen and a half Rolande, after only a few weeks with Lewis, had the immense joy of making a hat which Mistinguette fell in love with and immediately put on her head! When, at the close of this amazing day, she ran up the six storeys of the rue de Longchamps to tell her parents the news, Marie-Thérèse exclaimed:

'I knew it! I always knew it! I've given birth to an artist!'

Soon the hats the mother made with such difficulty and with misgivings, would be replaced by the masterpieces Rolande would create. The name 'Rolande Soilly' would glitter in the

rue de la Paix. The veilings, the artificial flowers, the supple straws, the birds of paradise, the egrets, the tulle, and the sumptuous tufts and plumes of the celebrated house of Lewis would have to compete against the young genius. This was exactly what Marie-Thérèse had dreamt of when reading those serials cut out from the newspapers—a glittering future. What a splendid marriage Rolande, the modiste, would make!

A few months later Rolande became a young woman. Serious disorders followed the young apprentice's maturity, and her health, which in girlhood had seemed rather better than mine, was violently shaken after each of her periods. She had several frightening haemorrhages. The family doctor told Marie-Thérèse not to worry too much, that if her daughter was losing so much blood it probably meant that she had a lot to lose. Her condition was therefore normal.

Reassured, mother and daughter continued to make plans for the future. Rolande went on running up and down stairs, fetching and carrying for the workwomen, rushing from store to store searching for ribbons or artificial flowers, but she was always quite stupidly tired, and soon every flight she climbed quite exhausted her, and she would remain panting on the last step, often having to sit down a moment before she could go on.

To celebrate her fifteenth birthday her parents were to take her to see *Cyrano de Bergerac* at the Comédie Française. Marie-Thérèse adored this play, and knew the most important lines by heart, claiming that it was the most magnificent of all love stories. Love stories were still her passion, she who was so loved and loved so tenderly. Rolande hurried home knowing that Louis would return early from work, probably with a present, anxious to help with the dinner, lay the table, and open the wine. She had not been well all day, but with the theatre to look forward to, the fuss everybody had made of her at Lewis's, the workwomen giving her bouquets of violets and lilies of the valley, according to custom when a *midinette* had a birthday, prevented her from thinking too much about moments of giddiness and suffocation. When she reached the rue de Longchamps she threw out a happy good night to the doorkeeper, started to run up the stairs, and found them interminable. At the top, quite out of breath, she rang at the door, felt her head turn, and cried out:

'Oh, mother, I think I'm going to be sick.'

Marie-Thérèse quickly fetched an enamel basin, held it in front of her daughter, then suddenly saw it fill with blood.

Rolande was not more than puzzled. My aunt had turned white. Her legs were shaking. She put her daughter to bed and sent for the doctor. A moment later Louis arrived with tall branches of white lilac, boxes of chocolate, and all sorts of presents for his dear little girl. When he saw her in bed he imagined that Marie-Thérèse was making her rest to be fresh for the theatre, but when, going into the kitchen, he saw the basin full of blood, and Marie-Thérèse, a finger on her lips, so white and shaken, he began also to be horribly afraid.

It was the same doctor who had come some months earlier. He fully reassured them, saying that as the accident coincided with her period he did not attach undue importance to it, but that it might be a good idea for her to take a tonic and that once a month she should spend the day in bed. Unfortunately other haemorrhages quickly followed. My uncle took her to a specialist, who immediately had her X-rayed. The negatives confirmed what the specialist already knew, that Rolande had been consumptive since attaining maturity. The dreadful illness was making swift progress. She must leave Paris as soon as possible and have a long rest in the country.

Marie-Thérèse turned to Ermeline. Ermeline was lucky to her. The first hat she ever made professionally was for Ermeline. Ermeline's mother, Mme Brossier, had been Rolande's second mother, her foster-mother. The house on the edge of the golden cornfield was a sunny memory. That Sunday, after she had taken Louis there to see Rolande who was then three, Louis had asked her to marry him. Miracles happened at Marais.

Marie-Thérèse and Rolande arrived at Mennetout on a hot July afternoon, and drove in a pony trap to Marais, where they lodged in the room where Rolande and I had stayed in 1912, the year Ermeline was so picturesquely married to Laurent.

Ermeline had changed terrifyingly. She had a charming little girl of seven, and Mme Brossier was still alive, but the tragedy of Laurent, still quite recent, hung darkly over the family.

Laurent had lost his right arm in the war. They had given him an artificial one, and sent him for a time to a place where he was taught to use the metal hand; but the peasant in him revolted at

the discovery that holding down horses, trussing hay, cutting down trees, and digging the earth were no longer within his possibilities. His powerlessness gave him such bouts of fury that he would remain for days with the most dark looks. Ermine, who loved him dearly, thinking herself lucky to have him back at all, served him touchingly. She tried, by working out of his sight, to spare his humiliation, for what he hated most was to see the things he would normally have done being done by Mme Brossier; poor old Esther, and herself. The idea that three women, two of them very old, were doing his work—that was what made him furious! And yet he didn't spare himself. He led the cows to pasturage, the sheep to the shearer, and was never too tired to bring up water from the well.

'There, my Laurent,' Ermine would say, 'it's a real pleasure for us to do the washing when you give us all the water we need.'

'What's so wonderful about bringing up water from a well?' Laurent would grumble. 'Any fool can do that. Woman's work, that's what I call it.'

Ermine, rebuffed, would add her tears to the soapy water. She loved him. She tried to show it. This sarcasm cut her heart terribly.

The winters at Marais were hard, and Laurent became increasingly taciturn. Other peasants swung the axe and the sledgehammer in the woods, put new handles to spades and forks beside the fire in the low room during the long evenings. Dispirited, he sat back in his chair reading the paper, that is if anybody went into Mennetout to buy one, for a newspaper was quite a rare thing in the village. When he had read all the news several times over in a well-thumbed one he would look up and see the four women knitting, sewing, or making cheese, laughing and almost forgetting his presence—old Esther, Mme Brossier, his wife, and his little girl, who was growing up so prettily, already clever with her hands. He had taken to raising his metal hand on these occasions, and staring at it in such despair that the women were moved by pity and fear. In the spring Ermine and her mother turned the heavy, damp earth in the kitchen garden, throwing out the weeds, planting the first rows of potatoes. The sun began to warm the lovely country, buds burst open, swallows made their nests, and robins left the eaves of the houses where they had stayed all the winter for food and warmth.

to seek adventure further away. It was a magnificent day, the sort of spring weather that makes one glad to be alive. Ermine's little girl was dancing round her skirts. Granny Brossier was talking to her goat. Laurent just looked sadder than ever, and his wife, vexed to see him so stubbornly insensitive to all the happiness round him, teased him a good deal and ended by putting a pail in his good hand, saying:

'Come on, Laurent, stop making a long face, and fetch me some water to cook the dinner with. We're all terribly hungry this evening. Think of it, the first real day of spring. Mother and I have dug twenty rows of potatoes, and to-morrow we shall have to do just as many!'

He went off without a word. Then Ermeline, looking back over her shoulder as she hurried towards the house, shouted:

'You will be quick, won't you, Laurent? And don't slouch so! I'll swear you're getting lazy!'

She waited a long time for her water, doing a score of other things about the house to keep busy. Then tired of waiting, and anxious, she went to see what Laurent was doing. The pail, still empty, was on the edge of the well, but the rope was unwound, and when she caught hold of it to see why it had slipped she felt a weight at the bottom. Hastily bending over the aperture she saw, deep down, a dark shadow, and then, understanding, gave a yell and ran to fetch her mother. The neighbours arrived and brought up the unfortunate Laurent, who had hanged himself from the rope. Ermeline continued to be haunted by that spring evening and the unfortunate words she had shouted to her husband on the way back to the house.

When Marie-Thérèse and Rolande arrived all this had turned Ermeline into a very sad person. Nobody used the well any more, with the result that the family had to make do with the rain water that fell from the gutters into a big barrel at the end of the house. Just then there was a heat-wave and the barrel was almost dry. For my aunt and my cousin, who were both in continual need of water to wash their things in, being scrupulously tidy, the situation was intolerable, especially as only ten yards away cool water bubbled up in the well which, since the tragedy, had become as inviolable as a tomb. Two fields away they discovered a stream, and soon had great fun taking their things there, but as it was in a valley the climb home was tiring.



The specialist in Paris had said that Rolande must eat as much beef as possible, but the inhabitants of the cottage, since Laurent's death, lived very frugally, existing entirely on the produce of their cow, the old lady's goat, and what they grew in their garden. Marie-Thérèse was obliged to go to Mennetout twice a week, on foot, of course. The amusement of visiting this little town, staring into the shop windows, especially that of the dark, curiously arranged haberdasher's, gave Rolande such childish happiness that her mother could not resist taking her; but the way home was so long and hot that they were both exhausted, and the meat they had bought for supper was so full of maggots that they would end by giving it to the chickens. So they had goat's cheese for supper—delicious, but not sufficiently nourishing for Rolande.

Rolande had discovered a great quantity of sedge which grew by the stream, and she plaited it into the most beautiful wide-brimmed summer hats which suited her admirably and which she could renew almost every day. It was wonderful to see how this talented young woman made models which would have delighted the great actresses who went to Lewis's. She decorated them with wild flowers, oxy-daisies, poppies, and cornflowers, and occasionally with ears of corn. One afternoon when she was fast asleep on a shady bank old Mme Brossier's goat came along and ate up her beflowered straw hat, and it must have been so much to the animal's taste that wherever Rolande went the goat was sure to follow.

The days went past very pleasantly—visits to Mennetout, long walks in the sun, evenings washing by the stream—and then one night, suddenly, Rolande had such a dreadful hæmorrhage that the countrywomen, seeing her vomit, made the sign of the cross, tears falling down their faces, terrified, convinced she was dying. Rolande went to bed, staying there all the next day, but as she got no better the cottage, the wheatfields, the poppies, and marguerites became as hateful to her as once they had been dear. She entreated her mother to take her back to Paris. Esther, Mme Brossier, and Ermeline, meanwhile, were terrified by this illness which, because they were strong and healthy, filled them not with pity but repulsion. They turned their eyes away from the young woman whom they had brought up, edging away from her, treating her a little like an ill animal put in a dark corner to

get better or die, and they seemed so terribly sorry for Marie-Thérèse that their exaggerated compassion frightened her. As soon as Rolande was able to travel my aunt took her back to Paris.

Louis was waiting at the station, and though he had not been told anything about the new hæmorrhage he noticed immediately that for once Marais had done no good to Rolande; but mother and daughter were so delighted to see him again, having felt alone and helpless, that the mere idea of putting themselves under his protection was as if they were half out of danger. Louis had prepared the most charming supper, after which they told him what had happened. He tried to reassure them, but said they must see the specialist next day.

The holiday in the country had made my cousin much worse. Long walks under a scorching sun through cornfields had aggravated the illness, and she was now in a condition where she must remain in bed by a wide-open window by day as well as by night. The autumn was mild, and the cure in the apartment in the rue de Longchamps was not too complicated, but when the cold and fogs of winter came Marie-Thérèse shivered as she made her hats beside her daughter, who was in bed kept warm by thick blankets and hot-water bottles. The sitting-room was the only room with a window of any size, and Marie-Thérèse needed the light. She would wrap herself up in a big coat and blow on her fingers to keep them alive, for her needle kept falling. The window was only closed for supper. Gradually Rolande began to have a better appetite. Hope swept through the family, and they even made plans.

Rolande was sixteen that spring. A year had passed since the terrible evening when they had hoped to go to the theatre. Marie-Thérèse worked very hard, but tired quickly, and when the pains in her stomach became aggressive she went to a doctor who sent her to the Laennec Hospital, where she had the first of her serious operations. Louis now hurried back to Rolande every day to make her lunch, and then ran to see Marie-Thérèse in hospital, and he was always smiling and full of hope, bringing little presents and encouraging news.

Marie-Thérèse was very pale and feeble when she came out of hospital, but almost gay, saying how lucky she was to have Louis and Rolande and a lovely home. She had seen such horrible

things in hospital. People had told her miserable stories. She sang now while she made her hats, feeling certain that next year things would be better, but when next year came Rolande, a few days after her seventeenth birthday, caught double pneumonia.

The little family was now in despair, waiting for the passing of each important day. A sister of mercy from St. Pierre de Chaillot, who had known Rolande when she was little, came every morning to pray with her, and finally suggested bringing a priest. Marie-Thérèse looked at the doctor, who nodded assent, whereupon the parents knew that the doctor had no more hope of curing her.

The priest administered the last sacraments, but when he had gone, though Rolande was very weak, she asked Marie-Thérèse for her curling-pins. She never went to bed without putting her hair in curls, and on this occasion she said, laughing, that at least she would die prettily, though in her heart she did not think she was going to die. After this show of bravery she relapsed, and the night proved very terrible, Marie-Thérèse and Louis watching her in turn. The next morning the sister of mercy arrived on tiptoe and asked in a whisper:

‘The dear little angel is certainly in heaven by now, is she not, my friends?’

‘No,’ answered Marie-Thérèse, weeping, ‘but I am afraid it will not be long now.’

Rolande was asleep, and that evening did not ask for her curling-pins. Then Marie-Thérèse threw herself on the bed unable any longer to hide her emotion. Both the parents remained up all night. Marie-Thérèse thought several times that her daughter was dead, so imperceptible was her breathing, and in the morning they hardly dared to move about the room. Suddenly Marie-Thérèse heard a faint voice:

‘Are you still there, mother darling?’

Marie-Thérèse and her husband hurried to the bedside. Rolande went on:

‘I’ve had such a beautiful sleep! I feel much better!’

The sister of mercy, who arrived a few minutes later, shook her head doubtfully. She had seen so many of these cases. Hope ran high, she said, only to be dashed down a few hours afterwards. This improvement was what she called the *mieux de la mort*—the better moment before death. They all prayed

anxiously, but when the doctor arrived and felt Rolande's pulse he exclaimed with authority:

'She will live.'

Youth had temporarily won against the terrible illness. Rolande gradually recovered a little strength, but soon came the inevitable parting from her family—the always dreaded sanatorium. Marie-Thérèse was heart-broken. She and her daughter were such friends. They got on so well together, were both so gay and frivolous!

My mother and I, of course, were in tears by now. The supper which Louis had done his best to enliven with the bottle of Burgundy had turned poignantly sad. The window was wide open. The birds continued to hop on the sill, and from other flats one heard plates being rattled and children laughing. My mother looked at me in an anxious way as if she thought I might suddenly have been struck with the same ruthless malady. Then she and Marie-Thérèse got up and went into the room next door. I was left alone with my Uncle Louis, who said:

'My poor little Madeleine, all this isn't very amusing for you is it? Paris is such a lovely city, and you're only twenty. Besides, you've become so pretty.'

He put a hand on my shoulder and looked at me, but he was really thinking of Rolande and how she could have been. We went to join my mother and Marie-Thérèse. The two sisters were in front of a big mirror trying on each other's hats and laughing.

EARLY next morning, leaving my mother in bed, I went into a café-bar for a French breakfast, very hot coffee and milk in a slender-stemmed glass, and three warm *croissants*, and set off gaily to begin my course of hairdressing and manicuring in the rue de Rivoli.

Several other young women arrived at about the same time as I did, and we were taken into a long, bare room in which there were a great many deal tables on each of which was a plaster head, some almost bald, others with a few wisps, and so on, through degrees, until at the far end of the room there were models with luxuriant hair which the more advanced pupils could skilfully wave and curl. In the centre of the room stood a large basin of water with sponges, a row of gas jets, and several dozen spirit-lamps to heat the curling tongs. I was given a white apron and led to the table with the most miserable of the plaster heads, my unfortunate mannequin having a single wisp of hair not more than three inches wide. Standing behind my model I was first taught to gauge the temperature of my heated tongs by placing them under my nose, and then to cool them by opening them and twirling them round, holding one of the branches between finger and thumb.

With the curling-tongs at the correct heat and a specially bought comb one was expected to execute that deft and pretty movement of pinching the hair, first on one side, then on the other, with the warm tongs. After each failure one went to fetch a damp sponge from the basin in the middle of the room. The ugly lines were removed, the hair dried with the tongs, and then all was ready to begin again. An instructress passed slowly between the tables, explaining patiently, taking up tongs and comb herself, then moving on to the next pupil.

After the first few days one knew everybody in this large, overheated room. *Midinettes*, tired of sewing, tried their hand

at this new profession which, since the Marcelle wave and the vogue of short hair, was tempting people into it like a gold rush on the Yukon. Some of the sewing girls came after their own work was finished. They tried very hard, but were not always very successful, and then became heart-broken. Other pupils were on holiday, and others were out of work because it was August, and so many dressmaking houses, for instance, were closed whilst the customers were at Deauville. There were shorthand typists who had decided they would never be able to spell, sales girls from the big shops who could not get on with their buyers, and a few young women with money of their own. The chief difference between this and my school of shorthand was that we were as free to talk and sing as seamstresses. Serenades and tangos filled the air. As we became more expert we moved from quarter heads to half heads, and soon we were making partings, to the left or in the centre, and joining the waves to the tune of *Valencia*. This song continued to rise from every part of the city, from the errand boys on their tricycles, the ticket collectors on the underground, children playing ball in the Tuileries gardens. Paris, crowded with foreigners, hummed and sang and whistled this Spanish *paso doble*, marking an age, *Valencia, Valencia*.

My mother came to fetch me, and would lend her head to the more advanced students, who would give her a shampoo and a wave which cost her nothing. Factory girls and charwomen came with such sweet smiles, and the idea of being beautified free of cost made them indifferent to our awkwardness and the occasional wisp we burnt with the too hot iron. They also entrusted their hands into our care: poor, tired hands, red with work, stained by acids; swollen hands of washerwomen and ironers; bleeding fingers of seamstresses, pricked by the needle. We filed them and cut them and polished them, and gave them back unrecognizable even to ourselves. The instructress, to lessen our pride at this transformation, would say to us:

‘That ’s nothing, my children. Wait till rich customers bring you hands that have never scrubbed a floor or washed a pair of bed sheets; soft, white hands that have always been perfectly cared for, and over which you will have to bend, my children, for thirty minutes perfecting their perfection, feeling hot and frightened, and when you ’ve done wondering whether you ’ve

done anything worth while. Unfortunately you won't be able to practise beforehand on hands like that. They don't come here to be done for nothing.'

Our teachers were so gentle and patient that one felt almost sorry so much skill was not employed to more useful ends. All day long they trod the alleys between us, advising, encouraging, smiling. I began to be rather good, and then suddenly everything was tremendously interesting. My waves became curved and supple, joining in the middle, as they were supposed to, forming pretty designs. Speed was sought as well as one's slowly improving cleverness. We were given just under an hour to trim, wash, and wave, and though by the end of the course many of us acquitted ourselves honourably, especially with the curling-tongs, the art of the scissors is far too subtle to be taught entirely at school, even be it in the rue de Rivoli. Nevertheless our instructors did not tell us that, and our customers being invariably satisfied we were full of chimera and daring.

Though we did not necessarily talk about it, the idea of visiting Clichy was always at the back of our minds.

Mme Maurer was our last remaining friend, and we decided to go and have dinner with her; but as we were anxious to make an impression walking down our street both my mother and I were shampooed and waved at the school to look our very best, after which we dressed in our Sunday clothes and took the underground to the Porte Clichy.

From here we went along the road bordered by the high cemetery wall where we used to meet Mme Gaillard's sister with her broom, past the big doors which opened on creaking hinges for funerals, and thence beyond the fortifications to the Boulevard Victor-Hugo, narrower and dirtier than I remembered it, narrower especially in comparison to our busy Charing Cross Road. The rag-and-bone men and shadowy apaches were still there, but they did not impress me, and I was rather disappointed not to feel myself quaking for my life and—I must admit it—for my virtue. The apaches were in small groups, so close to the grimy grey walls that they gave the impression of holding them up, spitting from time to time, a cigarette stub behind an ear, their check caps pulled over one eye, a wisp of hair showing, red neckerchiefs revealing the absence of collar and tie. As we hurried along the avenue memories came back thicker. There was the

public wash-house from which women emerged stumbling under the weight of enormous bundles of damp linen. How I would have loved to go and rediscover that smell of soap and disinfectant, to see again the washerwomen with their naked, rosy arms, their wide aprons, skirts pinned up, and ample hair decorated with shiny combs! But no, these women had doubtless all cut their hair and shaved their necks. Though still in my teens what I had seen but yesterday had already passed into history.

When at last we reached the rue Souchal I was struck not with the smallness of the houses, but by their height. They were taller than I remembered them, their six storeys dwarfing our low dwellings in Soho. Children were playing in the street, and I was vexed at this sentimental moment not to recognize a single one. New faces also looked down at us from familiar balconies. Even the doorkeepers had changed. The Alexis, the Bretons (to whom I had sold our garden), and the Guillels had gone without trace. The bicycle shop was now a wine merchant's and our haberdasher's had become a garage.

Here was Mme Maurer's house.

The new *concierge*, not knowing us, asked where we were going. We told her.

'Mme Maurer? You'll find her on the sixth floor, facing the stairs.'

We thanked her and went up. On each landing we were greeted by the smell of leek soup, grilled steak, and fried potatoes. Doors opened and children came out with an empty bottle under the arm, on the way to fetch a litre of red wine from the corner shop or from a keg in the cellar. They looked at us with curiosity, halting a moment to discover at what landing we would ring. I had done the same myself, and could read their thoughts. Tenants changed, but the peculiar smells of French cooking and the curiosity of children with wine bottles remained constant. Men's deep voices could be heard above other sounds like the cries of babies and crockery being laid on oilcloth-covered tables. My mother continued to climb the stairs silently, her lips rather tight, not a spark of nostalgia for the old life in her breast, seeming not to notice the little girls with their dark wine bottles, hair in plaits as mine had been not so very long ago. At last, on the sixth floor, opposite the top of the stairs, just as the *concierge* had said, was a door which, gently pushed,



led into a room narrow like a corridor with a bed at the far end. In this bed sat Mme Maurer wearing a white linen nightgown with red edgings and puckered sleeves. Her eyes scanned us as the door slowly opened, casting a shadow across our faces. She remained inquiringly motionless, a piece of wire and a paper flower in her hands, then suddenly exclaimed:

'Mme Gal! Madeleine! What a wonderful surprise! As you see, I'm bedridden, but my heart leaps with joy! Madeleine is magnificent, and as for you, Mme Gal, I swear you've grown younger since I saw you last. Anybody might mistake you for sisters.'

My mother blushed. She really did look very young. Life in London had this effect on her. She mumbled something to repay the compliment, but Mme Maurer exclaimed:

'No, please don't try to tell me I'm looking better. I know too well, alas, how I am. Just half alive, my dear Mme Gal, a poor wreck with nothing to live for. I ate my bread white when I was young. Since then, year by year, it's been getting blacker till soon, in the eternal night, I shan't even see it, and thank goodness for that! Madeleine, here, who ate her bread black when she was little may, I hope, eat it white as she grows older. Both of you are still very young. Your youthfulness warms my old bones. You would scarcely believe the good it does me to feel myself loved by a couple of strangers, for what are we but good neighbours? I certainly never thought when first we met how precious our friendship would prove to me.'

Mme Maurer spoke slowly in her excellent, rather stilted French. She was obviously returning in mind to her childhood in the historic house on the left bank of the Seine where her father, the actor, must have declaimed in much the same deep voice. Even I, who had little experience in these things, could see that she was near the grave, horribly conscious of her loneliness, paying the price of her atheism. I looked at her with a mixture of pity and horror. Was I to meet with nothing but sadness in this gay city? Marie-Thérèse, Rolande, Mme Maurer. I felt a desire to cry, and then to run out and prove to myself that I was young and alive. Had I been a man I would perhaps have smoked a cigarette, walked across to a café, and drank something strong like brandy. Being a young woman I left the talking to my mother and quietly went to the open window, peering over

the balcony. The street, seen from so high, appeared narrow, the children tiny. The doorkeepers were all sitting on their velvet chairs. The only difference was that I knew none of them. My eyes quickly sought the windows of our old apartment. There were bright curtains in both the bedroom and the kitchen, and where my father had died a young couple laughed amorously on the balcony, looking deeply into each other's eyes. At what used to be the Neveus' window a young woman with a baby in arms was talking to a little boy playing in the gutter. Mme Maurer said to me in her deep, solemn voice:

'Don't fall out of that window, Madeleine. The higher you are the more it hurts. I know a thing or two about falling from high up!' She laughed in a hollow sort of way. 'Sixty-eight! That's what I am! I've had a pretty long fall.'

She took a piece of copper wire from a bundle on her eiderdown and twisted some green paper round it to make the stem of a rose. She then made the petals of pink and red, saying as she worked:

'To-day it has really been far too hot. The sun just beats down through that window. The coloured paper tears and curls up between my sticky fingers, but I'll get up at four in the morning and make up for it. One practically needs no sleep at my age, and I rather like working at dawn. It's so quiet and cool.'

She turned to my mother and added:

'When I used to see these paper flowers on cheap stalls in the market I always thought them positively frightful! You must have seen them yourself. The factory hands love them. They buy them to put in those horrible vases they get for breaking clay pipes with an air-gun at the fairs. Still, believe me, now I make them myself I think they're rather nice. It just shows, doesn't it? One's tastes go down in the world!'

'I don't dislike them,' I said quite honestly. 'They look so fresh!'

'You really think so?' she asked, flattered. 'In that case you shall have the next dozen, but I'll make them deep red, red for love, and the green of the leaves will stand for hope. It will be rather exciting. This will be the first time I shall know what my customer looks like!'

The conversation was becoming a little brighter, and my

mother, finding that Mme Maurer's provision cupboard was empty, sent me down with a shopping basket to buy our supper. I ran down the stairs and made for the Place de la République.

I bought a loaf of bread and some cakes, passing the house where our doctor lived, the one who had looked after my father during his last illness. The brass plate had been pulled down. I remembered suddenly the way he had pocketed the fee and asked me what I planned to do, how he had said it was not so easy to become a good shorthand typist, and then, taking us to the door, appeared quite to lose interest in us. The wine merchant where my mother had bought a bottle of champagne for my father when he was dying was still there. I went in and chose a sparkling muscatel for our supper, and at the shop next door I bought half a dozen slices of ham, some hard-boiled eggs, a potato salad, and a few gherkins to remind me of my solitary lunches when my mother was out sewing. Further on there was a smart new hairdresser's, with a wax model in the window, a real peroxide blonde, scarlet lips, the bust draped in black velvet. I thought her quite magnificent, and was beginning to day-dream, forgetting I was grown up, making the street again my playground. Suddenly I smelt fried potatoes which, exciting my hunger, made me hurry back holding tightly to my provisions. My mother had laid the table; Mme Maurer had finished eight red roses. The sparkling muscatel was voted excellent, and so were the ham and the hard-boiled eggs. Mme Maurer asked me if I had found the street very changed.

'There's a magnificent new hairdresser's,' I answered, 'and I suppose Dr. Ravaud must have made his fortune, for he's gone.'

'I know nothing about the hairdresser,' said Mme Maurer. 'Since I came to live up here on the sixth floor from the first where I used to face your flat, I haven't once been out, and I don't suppose I shall till I'm ready to make my last journey, but if it's any interest to you I can tell you about Dr. Ravaud.'

'I never liked him much,' put in my mother. 'He was so caustic because I wouldn't let him send Émile to hospital.'

'He came to see me here once or twice,' Mme Maurer went on, 'about my ulcer in the stomach. He said I didn't need to tell him how much it hurt because he had the same thing. A few days later he locked himself up in his consulting-room and opened a vein. He had cancer.'

'But he was quite young!' exclaimed my mother.

'Forty,' answered Mme Maurer. She lifted her glass and looked reflectively at the wine, then went on: 'Has anybody told you that Dédé Gontrel is quite a celebrated dancer at the Opéra, that her mother had her hair bobbed at the new hairdresser's, became an usher at the local cinema, and turned the head of the manager, and that poor Riri is in a home for incurables? Oh, yes, and that Didine, the lovely Didine, is married with two children, and lives in a house at Asnières, where she keeps hens and rabbits in the back garden?'

'And Marie Guillet, the girl who used to drive us mad with her violin?' asked my mother.

'She eloped on her twentieth birthday with an Italian pianist who was only sixteen,' said Mme Maurer. 'There was quite a scandal about it.'

We guessed that Ulysses must have told her all these things, but she never once mentioned her son's name. Before we left she handed me my bouquet of red roses, and my mother put an envelope on her pillow with what, for us, was quite a large sum of money. We felt somehow that we would never see her again.

THE next day was wonderfully warm and the streets sparkled, gay with people. Marie and her sister Betty, two girls I had made friends with in London when I was at the Galeries Lafayette in Regent Street, had now returned to their widowed mother in Paris, and my mother and I invited them to lunch. Both now worked on a fashion paper called *Le Jardin des Modes*, whose offices were then in the rue Édouard VII, and we arranged to meet by the equestrian statue of the good English king in the quiet square just off the Boulevard de la Madeleine.

We lunched in an excellent little restaurant. My mother, looking only a few years older than us, laughed at our jokes. I had never seen her in better humour.

Betty, the elder of the sisters, had been cashier at Raoul, the shoe shop, while Marie and I had been sales girls at the Galeries Lafayette opposite. Betty was our model. Extremely pretty, sweet tempered, and capable, she earned enough to keep her mother and two younger brothers very comfortably in their apartment on the outskirts of Paris. She was unofficially engaged to a boy called Jacques, who was madly in love with her, but not quite strong willed enough to marry her in the face of strong maternal opposition, for he came of rather a rich and famous family and his widowed mother had set her mind on a more suitable match. The romance had been going on for nearly two years, Jacques becoming more and more in love, but too fond of his mother to break with her, hoping that one day something would happen to make both women happy. Betty never blamed her fiancé for his evasiveness. When, after Christmas, he left her for the winter sports, or in summer for a holiday at his mother's villa at Deauville, she simply said it was the privilege of a young man of his world. She spent her own holidays at home with a pair of scissors and some patterns from the fashion paper on which she worked, cutting out dresses in which she hoped later to please her Jacques.

Marie was in violent contrast to her sister, small, dark, calm in

appearance, but in reality torn by a sensuality that was in continual ebullition. Though we who loved her thought her pretty, she was less courted by men than Betty. Her features were gentle and her dark eyes full of promise. She was free, alas, too free, and though a first adventure had been catastrophic, she was now waiting with a young and loving heart for what she hoped would be the real thing.

I remember that our talk at lunch had mostly been about those pretty young Russian refugees who were just then filling Paris, having escaped from revolutionary Russia with a few jewels, their Slavonic charm, and large amorous eyes. Betty was in full cry against them, for they were apparently stealing all the best places in her magazine, prattling amongst themselves in their native tongue, affecting in French a quite delicious accent which made the men fall in love with them, and being so fresh in the morning after dancing till dawn in the night clubs of Montmartre.

'No, really,' she exclaimed, 'you have never seen such women! All night they dance, sing, drink vodka, and smoke like railway trains, and in the morning they turn up with ochre face powder, ravishing eyes, redolent of all that can be done in a night, mouths like ripe cherries, a tiny hat perched at an angle, and ready at a moment's notice to start work at their adding machines or draw a model from Lanvin. You should see them, Mme Gal, entirely absorbed in what they happen to be doing, quite oblivious to what has happened before, what is likely to take place in the future, and then suddenly a man comes into the room and immediately their nonchalant eyelids are raised, their eyes glisten behind lashes black and heavy with mascara, and now nothing matters but to capture his attention. I tremble to think what might happen if one of these creatures were to walk into my fiancé's office! They are irresistible, and the trouble is one can't even steal one of the men of their race, out of revenge, for all these Russians seem to be driving taxis or singing the Volga boat song in night clubs. It isn't fair, is it?'

We laughed as one does at that age, and Marie then said:

'I wouldn't blame anybody for dancing all night. This evening I'm going to the Rotonde in Montparnasse. You've no idea how gay it is, and everybody's dancing the Charleston. Oh, it's wonderful! You ought to come with me, Madeleine. Betty's going to the theatre.'

I looked inquiringly at my mother, not daring to answer.

'I don't see why you shouldn't,' she said. 'I shall spend the evening with Marie-Thérèse, and it's about time you should be with people of your own age. Will you promise to be back by midnight?'

Marie and I gave a solemn promise.

Marie came to fetch me at the hairdressing school, and took me home with her. It was quite a distance, in one of those broad avenues named after revolutionary leaders, on the fourth floor in a light, airy, modern building. The table was already laid, and Mme Jourdain, small and dark like Marie, talked and talked her head off in the gayest manner, asking questions she never gave us time to answer, starting a phrase as she put a dish down on the table, finishing it when returning from the kitchen with another. The two boys were here, both having just started to earn their living, very gay, listening to their talkative mother with affectionate irony, winking at us, not attempting themselves to put in a word. One felt that dinner time was Mme Jourdain's scene, her play, her theatre, and that it was up to us merely to be the spectators, acquiescing from time to time, enjoying her magnificent cooking.

The younger of the two boys, however, thinking perhaps that his mother was surpassing herself this evening, began to laugh behind his serviette, giving me friendly kicks under the table, whereupon Mme Jourdain, not supposing for a moment that his hilarity had anything to do with her, said to him:

'Oh, and you, laughing over there, I shall never forgive you if you get me into trouble with the doorkeeper's husband!'

'What do you mean, mother?' asked the young man, colouring.

'I should be quite broken-hearted if I had to leave this apartment. We are all so happy here like bees in a hive, just enough room for all of us. And the piece of waste ground with the green grass I can see from the window gives me the illusion of living in the country. Look for yourself, my little Madeleine! Isn't it pretty, and you can't imagine how sweet it smells at night. You know, I'm always so sorry for the people who live in the centre of Paris. The only way they can tell the seasons is by the oranges in December, the cherries and strawberries in summer, and the oysters outside the cafés in autumn; but as I say, I'm

privileged. I have my field. When one or other of you doesn't come home till after midnight and I get too anxious I open the window, listening for footsteps or the sound of a taxi, and look at my field with the thistles and grass all covered with dew. And the dandelions in spring, my little Madeleine! They make the most excellent salads. The doorkeeper's wife knows about the dandelions, but she's tied to her lodge like a dog to its kennel, so I often give her some of mine, but that's no reason, you young scoundrel, to make love to her. She belongs to the doorkeeper. do you understand?'

'Oh, mother, what nonsense! She's thirty at least!'

'Nonsense? This morning you didn't know it, but I came in behind you and with these eyes I saw you turn towards her lodge, and then I saw the curtain move and one geranium being pushed away from another so that madame could have a good look at my son. Yes, my children, that's what I saw and if I had been the doorkeeper instead of Mme Jourdain, there would have been an immediate explanation with the wife and a month's notice to the Jourdain family. That's why, young man, you will cease making eyes at the lady, and all the more so because she's very nice to look at!'

'I swear, mother, that if it hadn't been for Victor I wouldn't even have noticed her.'

Mme Jourdain turned on her eldest son.

'Oh, so you're in it too, are you? How right I was to bring the matter up. Now who wants some more of this Camembert cheese?'

The meal had been really delicious. Through the wide-open window a slight breeze after the heat of this August day fanned the tall grass of the field. Mme Jourdain served us coffee, took some herself, holding the cup in both hands, sensually inhaling the good smell, her nostrils quivering, her eyelids blinking. A widow, very young, with these four children, too rigid in her principles to think of remarrying, though she could have done so easily, she was being inwardly consumed. She and her daughter Marie had the same terrible sensuality, a need of reciprocated kindness, a burning desire for male companionship. All these things she tried to drive out of her system by an unending flow of words.

Suddenly dinner ended. Each took a dirty plate, knives, and forks, and went off with them into the kitchen. The table-cloth



was shaken out of the open window, carefully folded, and put back in the dresser. We went into Mme Jourdain's bedroom where our coats and hats were stacked, and crowding in front of the tall mirror with which the wardrobe was faced we combed our short hair, powdered our faces, put on lipstick. The boys, after loudly kissing their mother and waving to us, had gone. The noise of their steps could be heard dying away on the stairs. We were longing to do the same, but because we were young women a stronger self-control made us impatiently retard the moment of saying good-bye to Mme Jourdain, who suddenly had become silent, as if her play was over, looking out of the window, holding a basket with socks and shirts to mend. As soon as we had gone she would go into her bedroom where she would sit under the portrait of her husband, dark, with moustaches, rather serious.

Marie's voice broke out:

'Good night, mother, don't worry, don't sit up. I've promised Madeleine's mother to take her home before midnight. So you see I shan't be late myself!'

'Good night, Mme Jourdain. Thank you for the excellent dinner.'

'Good night, my little girls.'

We tore downstairs.

Outside on the pavement the doorkeeper's wife was sitting on her red velvet chair next to her doorkeeper, who was astride of his. He looked a very honest fellow with his flannel shirt open at the neck, revealing a hairy chest. His honest cap was pulled at an honest angle over his unimaginative head. I felt certain he must be quietly digesting leek soup and a rabbit pie left over from lunch and hotted up. One was not surprised his wife had moved her geraniums to see a good-looking young man, and she really was rather pretty for her age. She had the married happiness that poor Mme Jourdain so badly needed. Unfortunately none of us is ever quite satisfied with what is within reach.

Montparnasse was tremendously exciting. The Rotonde threw out its sparkle like a queen's diadem, and there rose from its crowded interior the sounds of a mad jazz. Crossing the terrace, elbowing our way past the customers sipping their multi-coloured drinks through straws, we went straight into the dance-room where enthusiasts were executing the newest steps. We

had not been there a moment before I was carried off by an unknown dancer into the midst of the cacophony. After several turns on the floor I came back to Marie, who had ordered glasses of complicated liquid, of which I remember neither the name nor the taste, so entirely was I possessed by the frenzy of the dance. A moment later another partner arrived and I was led off again. I danced with Swedes, Norwegians, Americans, and Englishmen. The Rotonde had people of every land and, unlike the delegates at Geneva, they were only too anxious to get down to business without a word more than was necessary. I was delighted, heady with this instantaneous success which was due more to my gaiety and immense vitality than to my prettiness. I felt capable of going on all night, and yet my heels were bleeding and my toes throbbing in patent-leather shoes with short ends which were far too small. I would be complaining about them to Marie, then suddenly a new partner would arrive, bowing and beckoning, and I would fly off. At midnight Marie was obliged to use her authority to take me away from this delightful place so packed with Prince Charmings. I found my mother in bed with rather a severe face, trying to read, but she said nothing, and before I was undressed she had put out the light and turned over as tired with waiting and anxiety as I with dancing. My feet beat like drums, the contact of the sheets when I jumped into bed being painful in the extreme. How on earth had I managed to go on so long laughing, turning, gesticulating, with my feet in such a state? No wonder jazz was considered so diabolical by the older generation!

On Sunday we were to lunch at the rue de Longchamps, and then take the train to Groslay to see Rolande in her sanatorium.

Marie-Thérèse was alone when we arrived, very gay, warmed by the sunshine and the thought of seeing her daughter. She was in Rolande's former room, the one in which I had noticed all the hat-boxes on our first visit, laying things out on the bed, like clean linen and provisions, which she was going to pack and take to the sanatorium. My mother had brought several small parcels which were presumably also for Rolande, for she put them on the bed. We went into the sitting-room, where the window, as usual, was open. I leant out of it, looking up and down this wide, leafy avenue with magnificent houses, of which

only the top floors were lived in during August. Lower down blinds were drawn and shutters closed, the rich tenants being in their country houses, at spas, or by the sea. The sparkling white houses had lost their expressiveness like people with their eyes shut.

Marie-Thérèse was doing her hair, and my mother was saying to her:

‘Even though you don’t like bobbed hair you must admit it saves a lot of trouble?’

‘I’m beginning to think you’re right,’ answered Marie-Thérèse. ‘If Rolande decides to cut hers I might do the same, only we’re so united in the family that I think we ought to put it to the vote. If we wanted it enough—that is, Rolande and I—Louis would be sure to agree. He’s so sweet about that sort of thing. The trouble is that with all this illness we’ve lost touch with what people are doing. Most of our friends have left off coming. I suppose they think we’re not interesting enough.’

When my uncle arrived we had a cold lunch, and then hurried to the station, where we climbed into a third-class compartment, which we were fortunate in keeping to ourselves, Marie-Thérèse and my mother having corner seats by the open window. Marie-Thérèse was soon in agony, claiming that the hard wooden seat grated against her bones. Louis took off his coat to make a cushion for her, and for a few minutes she seemed better, but soon she began to wriggle and to complain again, and asked me to change places with her, saying:

‘It’s amazing how this poor tummy, which has hardly anything left in it, can make me suffer!’

She pushed her husband’s coat aside, and sat on her folded hands as a pregnant woman sometimes does when she is alone. Louis opened a string bag and pulled out a bottle of water, a glass, and some aspirins. Then he skinned her a ripe pear with the patience of a man humouring a difficult child.

Conversation was not very brilliant, and I am ashamed to say that I was beginning to find the journey wearisome. Marie had told me she was going to a *thé dansant*, and I was jealous. The train was now clear of the outskirts and passing through the fresh country of the Oise.

Louis was talking to my mother about what he called his

business. He had left service, and had gone into a furniture shop near the Opéra, owned by a very old man who, having lost his only son in the war, had ceased to take much interest in the concern. My uncle was virtually in charge and dreamt of owning it one day. Marie-Thérèse listened to him in wide-eyed admiration and exclaimed:

‘Really and truly Louis is magnificent! Oh, if only we had better health I don’t know where he’d lead us to.’

A touch of colour was creeping back to her cheeks, and she began to prattle again under the influence of the aspirin. I had rather a pretty tie made of two marten skins which Mme Néroda had sold me, and which I had taken six months to pay for. I was extremely proud of it, and my aunt kept on stroking it and saying how pretty it was. She was herself wearing round her neck the most curious piece of fur without head or tail. My mother asked her what it was, having never seen it before.

‘But of course you’ve seen it before,’ exclaimed Marie-Thérèse, ‘but not quite like this! Don’t you remember that beautiful fur-lined coat which Louis’s gentleman gave him before the war? I made myself a tweed coat with the outside, and I turned the fur into a three-quarters winter coat for myself and a collar and a muff for Rolande, and after all these years this is all that’s left of it, and so I wear it round the neck with a costume in the form of a tie!’

‘The colour is not very pretty,’ said my mother, who never succeeded in hiding her contempt for what was not becoming. ‘I’m surprised you can wear it.’

‘Oh,’ said Marie-Thérèse, biting her lips, ‘after seeing it about the house for fifteen years I’m getting used to the colour. The important thing is that it cost nothing and keeps me warm.’

‘Well,’ put in Louis quickly, ‘I think it’s rather nice, and it looks so soft against her skin. She has such a fine complexion.’

Marie-Thérèse’s complexion was, at this moment, extremely red under the strain of defending her pride without starting another quarrel with my mother. Hurriedly changing the subject she began:

‘Last Sunday we were in the train like this with Rose——’

‘What?’ queried my mother. ‘Is Rose still alive?’

‘Of course,’ answered Marie-Thérèse, ‘and why shouldn’t she be? She’s only a few years older than I. And energetic! She

has inherited the prettiest house in Burgundy, but insists on keeping on with her job in Paris. Of course, really she is still waiting for her German lover. Have you ever heard of such patience?

'Call it what you like,' said my mother, 'but it's love. Yet I wonder what he would think of her if he came back now, for when I saw her last she was almost pretty, but that's ten years ago.'

'Pretty in her way,' said Marie-Thérèse, 'which didn't prevent her from looking like the cook she was. Only now she's different. She has become fatter and more prosperous with rings on her fingers and that necklace which we all thought so pretty, and which she has promised to leave to Rolande in her will. She's a good soul is Rose, and quite devoted to us, but when she comes with us to the sanatorium it's not really to see Rolande, but to spend the whole of the journey, there and back, talking about her German. If she saw you she would be delighted to have somebody new to discuss him with. She has developed a cult for everybody who ever met him. With all that she's my last friend. I'll never have time to get to know any new people. It takes too long.'

Louis sprang up, fussing with the parcels, for the train was pulling into Groslay, a pretty little town in the Seine-et-Oise, and as we walked down the platform my uncle and aunt appeared to know nearly all the other passengers making their way to the barrier. A tired little man doffed his hat, shook my uncle by the hand, and said:

'I'm so anxious, wondering how I shall find her to-day. I've had a terrible week. Something tells me she's worse.'

He doffed his hat again and slid through the crowd to the barrier.

'Poor devil!' exclaimed Louis, turning to my mother. 'His wife has just died from *it*, and now his daughter has *it*.'

We crossed the station yard, and were soon in the prettiest lane. Marie-Thérèse ran ahead of us and picked some wild flowers, exclaiming:

'Madeleine, doesn't it remind you of Marais? Here are some cornflowers and poppies!'

But almost immediately her high spirits drooped and she sat down on a grassy bank to rest, saying again that she could not understand why her tummy should go on being so painful after

all these operations. She got up of her own accord after a few minutes, and walked more quickly, trying to recapture her gaiety, till we reached some gates where we found all the people who had left the train at Groslay. They were talking in groups with the familiarity of *habitués* who arrived by the same train every Sunday, waited for the gates to open at two, and came out together when the bell rang in the evening. Most of them had put down their parcels and were fanning themselves with folded newspapers because of the heat. A rather fat woman with her back to the gates waved to my uncle and aunt and shouted in a shrill voice:

'I got here first again! The same as last Sunday, do you remember? This time I've brought her a sirloin I cooked myself before leaving!' She pointed to an osier basket, and went on: 'I shan't kiss her till she has eaten some. Ah! But you 'll see!'

My aunt smiled at her in a friendly way, but while she was doing so I noticed a curious twitch on the right side of her mouth. All her lower muscles seemed to be dancing. When she saw that I had become aware of this state of affairs she quickly put her hand to her face and the twitching ceased, but she blushed violently. I wondered at the time what her thoughts had been, what had gone on inside her. Later I knew it was physical pain making more noticeable the effects of that terrible night when, as a child, she was lost by my grandmother in the forest of Roussy. She had been afraid, you remember, of being eaten by the wolves. The muscles on one side of her face had never quite recovered.

Marie-Thérèse turned to my mother and said:

'We call the fat woman over there the Vierzonnaise. She comes from Vierzon. She's sorry for me because I'm so thin and I'm sorry for her because she's so fat. Besides, look at that ridiculous little *cloche* with the mauve feathers she's wearing! What dreadful taste!'

I looked back at the woman she called the Vierzonnaise, and became aware of a tiny man beside her, dark, neatly dressed, timid, looking terribly worried. Whenever his wife spoke to anybody in the crowd he smiled and bowed automatically, but his thoughts were obviously on the other side of the gates which now, suddenly on the striking of the clock, opened.

A wide lawn stretched in front of a large country house, 1900

style. We went up immediately to the main room, containing about forty beds facing one another, as in a hospital ward, with tables decorated with flowers. A few young women were in bed, but most of the patients were up, waiting for their relatives. The end of the room overlooking the park had sliding glass doors, which were always open so that we were virtually in the open air. Marie-Thérèse went straight to the second bed on the left, beside which stood a blonde young woman who threw herself into her arms before I had time to pay much attention to her features. A moment later my aunt, turning round, happiness written all over her face, said to my mother:

'Here she is, Matilda, here 's my darling girl!'

'How do you do?' asked Rolande, as if she were being presented to my mother for the first time.

It was then my turn: two young women, quite unknown to each other, who might already be married. We were rather embarrassed, and looked for guidance to our mothers. Mine was very moved to be in the presence of her niece. Her blue eyes were filled with tears she was most anxious to hide. She bent over the parcels I had noticed in the morning, undoing the string, revealing all sorts of presents for Rolande, a pair of blue satin slippers with high heels, some lingerie silks, handkerchiefs, stockings, and some knitting wool. Rolande was delighted and kept on saying:

'Really, Matilda, you are too kind!'

I stayed a few paces away, being too healthy to feel the same emotion as my mother, and my eyes wandered towards a pale young woman in the bed next to Rolande's, frail as a child, her head resting on two pillows. Beside her knelt a man who was rummaging in a little food chest under the table, and as he looked up I recognized the man at the station who had said to my uncle: 'I 've had a terrible week. Something tells me she 's worse.'

He now said to the girl in bed:

'Oh, Laurette, how naughty of you. You haven't eaten anything I brought you last week, none of those lovely biscuits, or even the chocolates from the Marquise de Sévigné. Oh, my Laurette, how you grieve your poor father! To think I 've brought you more biscuits and more chocolates! But, Laurette, why don't you tell me what you want? You know I 'd go to the other end of the world to satisfy your desires.'

'Oh, I know, father,' she answered, coughing, 'but the only thing I want any more is not to cough.'

She stretched out a hand, and taking a small box from the table removed the cover and spat into it. Then she went on:

'Oh, father, do stop rummaging in that cupboard. You get on my nerves. Sit on the edge of my bed and tell me about the *concierge* and our neighbours, and all the people I want to know about.'

He became agitated, making more noise than was necessary, rose from his kneeling position, and, after straightening his tie, changed the position of his hat, which looked like a puddle of ink on his daughter's white bed. Drawing up a chair he took her hot hands in his and began to talk softly. All my sympathy was for Laurette and her unfortunate father whose name I did not even know. Suddenly I heard Rolande asking:

'Shall we go and walk in the park? It's full of birds.'

She showed her new slippers to Laurette in passing, and smiled at the father. Then, taking her mother's arm, she led us to the garden.

The lawn was covered with long wicker chairs, with mattresses and rugs on which the patients rested morning and afternoon, neither talking nor reading, merely listening to the birds singing and the leaves rustling. Before dinner most of them walked a little in the park. Afterwards they had to eat even though they were not hungry, but most important of all was to remain gay, to want to get well, to be full of hope. For some it was very difficult; for Laurette, for example, who, unless a miracle happened, was very near her end. That thought was clearly on her father's face.

Rolande really believed she would get well and said:

'In two or three years when I get out of here my daddy will have to buy me a little cottage in the country—oh, a very simple one with a thatched roof—with two bright bedrooms, one for you two and one for me, and in order to give me plenty of fresh air daddy and I will knock down a wall so that the birds can fly right in and nest above my bed!'

We laughed and I exclaimed:

'But what will happen when you're married? Perhaps your husband won't like the idea of sleeping under a bird's nest.'

She answered superbly:

'If he loves me he'll like everything I like.' Then more



seriously: 'You wouldn't understand, Madeleine, what it means not to be able to breathe. If I had to go back to the rue de Longchamps I would stifle.'

Louis broke in:

'No, no, I promise. You'll never go back there. You couldn't climb the stairs. I'll buy you a cottage in the country.'

The park was really very pretty. We passed other young women with their relations, and every time, of course, we asked Rolande who they were and for how long they were here. A young woman arrived on the arm of her young husband. She had been struck down immediately after the birth of her first child, who was not yet a year old. All the week she worried about her baby, about her good-looking husband, afraid to lose him. As soon as she saw him she asked him cunningly a great number of questions to discover what he had been doing all the week, and as soon as he had gone she was so miserably jealous and fearful of the future that she buried her face in the pillow and sobbed. Then there was Laurette, also crying, pushing away all the good things her father had brought her, and at the other end of the room the daughter of the woman from Vierzon, tiny, frail, worn out by her mother's insistence that she should eat the lunch she had so lovingly prepared. Rolande told us these things with such a mocking laughing air that one quite forgot that she also had the dread malady.

She was beginning to look at me critically, admiring my healthy cheeks, but blaming me for having had my hair cut short. Hers—long, blonde, and silky—was magnificent, like that of a child. We had escaped a moment from our parents, and compared our legs, deciding that in this respect there was nothing to choose between us, that we had just the right legs for short skirts. Then, without meaning to make her jealous, I described my evening at the Rotonde and similar evenings in London, the flirts I had to my credit, and my dreams for the future, which were much vaster than a cottage in the country, more like the house full of furs and dresses belonging to Mme Lapage's sister, who remained a sort of heroine. Rolande did not laugh at me. On the contrary, she seemed impressed and said:

'If that happens you might help daddy buy that cottage in the country, for, between ourselves, I haven't much hope of the poor dear doing it by himself.'

'Of course I will!' I exclaimed.

She pressed my arm by way of thanks. We had rediscovered one another.

Our parents rejoined us, and we went back into the house where Marie-Thérèse, exhausted, her face very red, sat down. Louis looked miserable to see his wife doubled up in pain. My mother was terribly moved, her eyes wandering round the room from bed to bed. If I had begun to cough at that moment I think she would have let out a cry.

These last few minutes before the bell were cruel. Marie-Thérèse drew her daughter towards her and kissed her greedily, while Rolande, to give herself courage, spoke to her mother as she used to do when she was little. Then she would turn to Louis and bring him childishly into the conversation. Laurette's father edged clumsily nearer the young woman whose life was ebbing away, closed her eyes as if by premonition, stroked her dark hair, clasped her clammy hands, and said pitifully:

'Really I find you much better this week.'

Furtively he looked at the clock, anxious to escape, and yet fearing to leave. My uncle, whose kind heart understood what was going on, said to the poor man:

'I've brought my niece this week. She no longer has a father, and she and her mother have found life pretty hard.'

Laurette looked at me with sudden interest, pitying me because I had no father. Louis went on:

'One can't have everything, can one?'

Laurette's father was grateful for this interlude. I heard my uncle whisper to him:

'Let's all go back to the station together, try to cheer one another up a bit, eh?'

'Yes,' agreed Laurette's father. 'We can talk of *them*.'

On the opposite side of the room the woman from Vierzon, whose mauve-feathered *cloche* was slightly askew, looked at her daughter, who for the last three hours had been reclining against the father's numbed arm. The little man's eyes were filled with tears. To make his daughter's position more comfortable he was trying to synchronize his breathing with hers.

One heard hurried kisses. A nurse had arrived, and was tidying up paper and string thrown down by the visitors. She said it was time for temperatures to be taken. A bell rang.

Laurette's father was the last to leave. We were waiting for him by the gates, but when he arrived he merely doffed his hat and said to my uncle:

'Ah, my good sir, my daughter is lost. Good-bye, my dear sir.'

He hurried off; then suddenly turned and exclaimed:

'Your daughter is much better. I am happy for your sake.'

He raised his hat for the last time and disappeared, leaving us all rather shaken.

When we reached Groslay the woman from Vierzon and her husband were sitting on a station seat, he silent and thoughtful, she dazed to the point of stupidity. Every Sunday, according to Louis, the unfortunate woman was struck in the same way. She owned a laundry, and worked so hard during the week that she had little time for reflection; then on Saturday night she would buy all sorts of robust food for her daughter, imagining that the slender girl could be bullied into having her own large appetite. 'She's just tired,' she would say to herself. 'A good piece of beef will put her right again.' Louis and Marie-Thérèse saw them arrive every Sunday full of energy, the woman speaking in a loud, rough voice, bustling her poor creature of a husband, but their return was very different. Faced with the full measure of the illness she would suddenly collapse into this dazed state. My aunt went up to her as she sat with her husband on the platform seat, and said compassionately:

'You mustn't worry too much. How could you expect any of them to look very well in this dreadful heat?'

'Do you really think it was the heat?' asked the Vierzonnaise. Then turning to her husband: 'Do you believe that?'

He sighed but said nothing.

The train came in, and we made a rush for the third-class compartments which were full of young people who had spent the day in the country, eating in arbour'd restaurants by the river, sleeping arm in arm in the freshly mown hay, happy, sunburnt, dishevelled, the women with wild flowers in their *cloche* hats which were pulled down over their young foreheads. Several squeezed to make room for us. We smiled and brushed past their short skirts. The train went off again and conversation began.

Marie-Thérèse had been offered a corner seat, and she sat,

exhausted, with her ridiculous piece of fur on her lap. She looked up at my mother and said:

'I heard you telling Rolande that everything had gone wrong in your life. I can't understand you saying that. Just now, for instance, you're much luckier than we are. The past doesn't hurt as much as the present. It's what happens now that matters and you won't know what health means till you lose it.'

'You can lose your health momentarily and get it back,' said my mother. 'People fall ill every day, but they don't all die. You and Rolande, for instance, are sure to get well again, and then you'll find yourself in a nice home with a husband who loves you. That's why I think you're lucky. I've never been loved like that.'

'That's just a question of finding the right man,' said Marie-Thérèse, looking in the direction of Louis, who was standing at the other end of the crowded compartment.

'Luck, I say,' repeated my mother.

The train stopped at another station.

'By the way,' asked my mother, as the train moved off again, 'did you ever hear what happened to Raoul, the good-looking footman, and the beautiful Héléne, the old doorkeeper's wife?'

'Raoul lost an arm in the war. Perhaps you knew that?'

'Yes, I think I did,' answered my mother.

'He was no longer so pretty when he came back,' my aunt went on. 'He had a stubby beard, and was rather stout, and with only one arm . . . But then, of course, things had changed so, hadn't they? I mean, there were no more liveried footmen or smart carriages. All that had vanished as completely as Raoul's good looks. Well, at any rate, he and his rather faded mistress set up together and started to sell silk stockings on the boulevards or anywhere else where they could put up a trestle-table and an acetylene lamp.'

'Héléne's husband, the *concierge*, was dead, wasn't he?'

'Of course, quite a long time back.'

'Go on,' said my mother.

'You remember that when Héléne and Raoul were young they had wanted to elope to North Africa, where Héléne had a sister?'

'That's right, but the war came and they couldn't go.'

'Exactly. But after the war Germaine, the sister, who was a prostitute in a brothel in Algiers, came back to Paris without

any money, and turned up at Hélène's and Raoul's flat, where she installed herself, claiming that Hélène owed her hospitality. She used to stay at home all day smoking Raoul's cigarettes and reading novels. In the evening she made herself look nice and went to meet Raoul and Hélène on the boulevards. One evening, caught by a downpour, she ran across the road on her high heels to shelter in a doorway. She had the tiniest feet and was always particular about her shoes. An elderly man who was sheltering in the same doorway began to talk to her. She knew how to amuse men, and they got on so well that he offered to take her to the boulevards in a taxi. As they were getting in he said something to the effect that her shoes would be ruined by the rain. She agreed, and added that it was a pity because shoes were her one luxury. From that moment he never left her. It turned out he was a millionaire shoe manufacturer. There was a very smart wedding, and she was married in white!

'Oh!' exclaimed my mother, biting her lips.

'Of course it didn't help Hélène and Raoul,' my aunt went on, 'because Germaine said they had tried to snub her when she had arrived from Algiers, and so she slammed the door and left them without a thank you.'

'Do *you* ever see Germaine now?' I asked, interested.

'Oh, no,' answered Marie-Thérèse, laughing, 'she's too smart for us. Fancy! jewels, furs, a motor-car, and a chauffeur!'

In the taxi from the station to the rue de Longchamps we were almost happy. When we drew up outside the house my mother nudged me to get out first and pay. The driver was a Russian *émigré*, the husband perhaps of one of those bewitching ladies who made my poor Betty so angry at the *Jardin des Modes*! I gave him a generous tip, very proud to show off a little, and the driver, making me the most comical bow, exclaimed in his Slavonic accent:

'Thank you, blonde and beautiful young lady. You are as generous and gay as the princesses in my country!'

He let in his clutch and very gravely drove off, looking straight in front of him.

FOR our passing out at the school of hairdressing each of us was to make beautiful some brave but impecunious young woman who had agreed to this free metamorphosis. Mine still had her eyes full of sleep, for she worked in a Montmartre night club and had only just got up. The heat-wave continued, and we had taken off our dresses and put our white linen coats over our petticoats. The very pretty dress which my mother had made out of Mme Thémiers's ribbon hung on a peg behind me above a chair on which I had put my bag and my hat. In the evening, whilst my mother was at the rue de Longchamps, I was to go dancing for the second time with Marie at the Rotonde, and I wanted to look my best.

I worked extremely hard, cutting, washing, and waving the hair of my young model. I then did her hands, and as she was pretty the effect was rather good. An instructress showed me what I had done wrong, improved several waves, and having done the same thing to the other pupils gave us to understand that we could now count on our diplomas.

When, at seven, elated, all talking at the same time, we started to take off our white coats and announce the good news to our parents, I could not find my bag. I looked everywhere, my heart thumping with emotion, childish tears pouring down my cheeks. My bag was full of newly acquired treasures, a powder compact, a lipstick, a comb, a note-book with some addresses, and all my savings in a pretty wallet. Between sobs I gave my companions a minute description of these objects. When I saw them powdering their faces and putting on lipstick my tears redoubled.

In a few minutes my companions had gone and the room was bare. The instructress with her hat and coat on was coldly impatient, anxious to lock up. She put the curling-tongues away noisily, gave a last tight turn to the taps, and looked at me inquiringly. Fear of what my mother would say was growing,

and then a new cause for panic. My passport! My nose shining, my eyes red with tears, I went down the black staircase into the rue de Rivoli, crowded, noisy, still bathed in hot sun. Quite lost with nothing to hold, my arms and hands feeling stupid, I was so conscious of looking ridiculous that I did not dare hold my head at its proper angle, but hung it shamefully, quickening my pace to almost a run, gradually conscious of a fresh disaster, that I was penniless, and would have to cross half Paris to confess myself to my mother at the rue de Longchamps. My evening with Marie at the Rotonde was off.

While hurrying thus, blind to everything around me, I bumped into a passer-by, a total stranger, who stopped me half angrily, saying:

'Why on earth don't you look where you're going, my poor child?'

Furious at what I considered an unwarranted freedom, I said in English:

'Leave me alone!'

'Oh,' he exclaimed in the same language, but with an accent that was clearly French, 'I see we speak English, but even that isn't a reason why you should run into me!'

I looked at him, still angry and even afraid, but his self-possession and grey temples reassured me. I said:

'I'm sorry. I didn't do it on purpose. I was upset about my bag.'

'Yes,' he answered, 'I see you haven't one, and that you've been crying. You don't need to be afraid of me. I won't eat you. Let's have a drink at the terrace of the Régence. It will do you good to tell me your story, and as I've parked my car opposite I'll drive you to wherever you happen to be going.'

The Régence, facing the Comédie Française, meeting-place of writers and actors, had always struck me as one of the most beautiful cafés in Paris. I saw immediately that my companion was genuinely sorry for me, that the gaiety which replaced my tears after a glass of sherry amused him, and that I need have no fear for my virtue. The wine warmed me deliciously. I was soon describing my aspirations, what I hoped to do in London, how I lived with my mother in Soho. Nothing could stop this flow of words which I could feel doing me good, calming my nerves. He paid the bill and led me to his little open car drawn

up a few yards away, and as we drove to the rue de Longchamps I was almost happy, but as soon as we arrived the fear of what my mother would say again gripped me, and I climbed the stairs with a throbbing heart.

She was, of course, extremely surprised to see me and, after I had followed her through Rolande's former room and stood in the light by the open window of the sitting-room, she saw by my embarrassed look that something serious had taken place, and she said:

'I suppose you didn't pass your examination.'

'Much worse than that.'

'Worse than not passing your examination? What on earth do you mean?'

Marie-Thérèse was sitting on a low chair in her usual corner, her feet on a stool, an unfinished hat on her pointed knees, and she looked at me in such a funny way that I burst out crying and exclaimed:

'Listen, mother, while I was passing my examination somebody stole my bag, and I had all my savings and my passport in it.'

'It's a nuisance about the bag,' said my mother calmly, 'and it's a pity about the money, but you don't need to worry about the passport because this morning when you were still asleep I took it out of your bag for fear you would lose it. Here it is with mine.'

I was astonished at the unexpected turn in my affairs. Marie-Thérèse said:

'I can't understand you, Matilda. Aren't you going to punish the big silly?'

'What good would that do?' answered my mother. 'It wouldn't bring her bag back. She's punished enough by having to stay with us this evening instead of going to Montparnasse to dance with her friend. All one can say is that it's probably better for her health.'

When Louis arrived he was told the details, and during supper I was a good deal laughed at, especially about the small Citroën in which I had been driven back from the Régence. My uncle said he would have been more impressed if it had been an Hispano-Suiza. 'My poor Madeleine,' exclaimed Marie-Thérèse, 'anybody can see you were not born lucky!' My mother nodded as if approving.



At the end of what for me was a miserable evening we walked home, my mother, with her usual tiny steps, rolling her hips, I hard put to it not to sulk.

The next morning I went back to the school of hairdressing till lunch time. Then, hurrying out into the rue de Rivoli, I came upon my companion of the previous evening waiting for me. 'I couldn't resist coming to ask you if you had got into hot water last night!' he said, laughing. 'I see you're still without a bag. Let's have a drink. If you're worried about going back to London quickly I might be able to help you at the passport office.'

I told him that my mother had taken my passport away in the morning while I was asleep, and that my only punishment would be to have no bag till we were back in London.

'Oh!' he answered. 'Now I really am sorry for you! What will you do with your hands for two whole days without a bag when you go out? Suppose you let me buy you one? Giving pleasure is the fun a man gets at my age. I've kept my lunch time free. At three I shall have to say good-bye. What do you say to letting me entertain you till then?'

I hesitated.

We were passing at that very moment one of the many delightful shops in this famous Paris street where the prettiest bags abound. He took me by the arm and bought me one. Two doors further on a compact, a lipstick, and a tiny comb were quickly chosen. At the corner of the next street a window was full of delicate cambric handkerchiefs. He bought me one of these, saying that I was to have everything I had lost. I was delighted. We lunched in a small restaurant—a steak and fried potatoes, apricot tart and cream, cheese, and strong black coffee.

'I've another half-hour,' he said, looking at his watch. 'Where would you like to go?'

'Anywhere.'

'How about Montmartre?'

'Oh, yes.'

We found the Citroën in a side street, and he drove me to the Sacré-Cœur, glistening in the hot sun.

'Come!' he said, jumping out.

The wide terrace in front of the church was crowded with

sightseers. We hurried up the steps, entered the cool nave, where my companion knelt and crossed himself. After a moment he whispered:

'The Sacré-Cœur is the vision I had during four years in the trenches. It was my comfort. It was all Paris. I come to pray here as often as I can. You'll often see my little car drawn up outside.'

'I was born a few yards away,' I said, 'and yet I've never been inside!'

We went to the Place du Tertre, where a man with an accordion was singing:

*'Comme il était beau mon village,  
Mon Paris, mon Paris.  
On y parlait qu'un seul langage,  
Ça suffisait pour être compris!'*

Our little walk in Montmartre was magnificent. What a restful feeling to amble through these steep and crooked streets after the terrible emotions of the last ten days! I saw with eyes full of curiosity the house where I was born, the dingy café below, the firewood and charcoal in the yard.

A few minutes later my companion drove me back to the rue Vivienne, where my mother was waiting at our hotel.

The next morning I went for the last time to the school of hairdressing to receive my diploma, an illuminated scroll announcing that I, Mlle Madeleine Gal, had passed with honours an examination in hairdressing and manicuring. The parchment was addressed to prospective employers and signed by a member of the guild. I rolled it up carefully and held it tightly with my bag, which never left me now, and walked across to the Régence to say good-bye to my friend.

My mother and I were to lunch with Marie-Thérèse, and spend the afternoon with her before leaving on the Dieppe-Newhaven service for London. As it was too early to go to the rue de Longchamps my companion drove me round the Bois de Boulogne and then, returning to the Étoile, took me to a street off one of the radiating avenues where a shining new building was going up in terraces so that each storey should have the full strength of the sun. As soon as we parked the car the foreman came to show us round. I was very moved to find myself with men who reminded me of my father. I was not afraid of

the dust, and the smell of plaster was familiar. I would have liked to embrace these men whose faces were lined deeply with fatigue, long hours, and the sparse comforts of lodgings like those we had lived in at Clichy.

My companion told me that he was so nervous of seeing his entire fortune dwindle in successive devaluations of the franc that he was building this hotel which would be ready in a few months' time. There would be a beauty parlour which I could take over if I wished. Meanwhile he had written me a letter of introduction to a friend in London who might engage me as a manicurist at the Savoy.

He then drove me to the rue de Longchamps, where we parted, bringing to an end a strange acquaintanceship which was to have quite an important bearing on the future course of my professional life.

Marie-Thérèse was in agony that day. The weather was turning stormy, and the many aspirins she had taken during the morning did not appear to be giving her the usual relief. She was just back from hospital and my mother's departure made her very sad.

The two sisters were sitting side by side.

My mother, to keep herself busy during the long hours she had spent with Marie-Thérèse, had made a dress for Rolande. As she said, it did not represent a great deal of work—a long corsage, hardly any skirt, and no sleeves! Marie-Thérèse was making me a jade-green hat. She laughed at me for my love of bright colours, a taste I had picked up in London where brilliant hues compensate for days of fog and damp. My aunt claimed that one could only be smart in black or dark blue with a little white in the right places.

Rummaging in her hat-boxes she had discovered this piece of jade taffeta spun so tight that her needle had trouble in going through the material. From time to time she would try it on my head, making me step back to the window to judge the effect. She would then have an idea and make me come forward again so quickly that I hardly had time to catch sight of myself in the big gilt mirror which the mother of my Uncle Louis had given her in 1913 before leaving for the Argentine.

At six my uncle came back from his furniture shop and we got ready to go. My aunt promised to write twice a week. Then

putting the finished hat in a bandbox with the name of Lewis on it, she kissed me tenderly and accompanied us to the door. My uncle took us some of the way home. He also promised to write to my mother, but asked her, if she mentioned my aunt's health, not to write to the rue de Longchamps but to his office. He left us reluctantly as if his responsibilities were too great for his tired shoulders.

WE reached Victoria at half-past five on Sunday morning. The milkman was at the top of the street, and we heard bottles being banged together and the cry of 'Milko' as he went from door to door. Our taxi driver helped us with the luggage, his heavy steps making a dreadful noise on the stairs. My mother clearly was nervous, fearing that our neighbours, suddenly awakened, would put their heads out and insult us.

Our room smelt of pepper and mice. Flowers in a jug on our wash-basin had withered horribly. I had refused to throw them away before leaving London—they were so fresh, so colourful, so pretty, that I could not believe they would die. My mother, whose nerves were already on edge because of the noise the taxi driver had made coming up the stairs, was angry because the water in the jug was rank, and now while it was still dark we would have to run down into the yard to throw the dead flowers in the dustbin and then wash the jug and draw clear water on the landing. Meanwhile, looking for matches, we hit our shins against the table legs. The foul air in this room, the window of which had not been opened for three weeks, caught our throats. Our return from holidays was certainly a sad business.

My mother took off her hat and turned on the gas. I watched her stupidly and half asleep.

'Run down and find that milkman,' she said. 'We'll feel better after breakfast, but see to it you don't make a noise going downstairs.'

Day breaking gave a little more colour to the street, and the air had a nice fresh tang. The milkman had gone, but I could hear the wheels of his cart in New Compton Street, and I ran in his direction. A real London Sunday morning was beginning. The old smells came back: cold fat from the Soho restaurants, banana skins rotting in the gutter remindful of nail varnish.

Paper flew from one pavement to the other, newspaper, betting slips. There must have been an important race the day before.

The milkman came towards me and queried:

'Bonne holidays in gay Páree, mamzelle? You aren't half lucky! I went to Moulin Rouge on leave during the war.'

In his enthusiasm he gave me good measure, and on my return to our room my mother had opened the window, made the coffee, and laid the breakfast at one end of the table. She had even thought of bringing a loaf of French bread and some *croissants* from Paris. I admired her thoughtfulness, and was extremely hungry. Afterwards she made me undress and go to sleep, for my lids kept on falling.

I was wakened by a fierce clanging of our old-fashioned door bell. I sat up in bed and leaned out of the window, whereupon I saw Emma, our Swiss-German friend who worked at the 'Pop,' in her Sunday clothes, a light grey coat and skirt and a vivid red hat, obviously all ready to go to the Swiss church in Endell Street. She gave me to understand that she first wanted to know how we had enjoyed our holidays. My mother gave me the key of the downstairs door, which we wrapped up in a piece of newspaper, throwing it down to Emma in the street.

She sat at the end of my bed and listened to everything. My jade green hat was about the only thing that met with her approval, but she pointed out that it was not practical to have a green hat at the beginning of autumn. 'When the summer holidays are over,' she said, 'you must think about winter.' She said she had already thought about hers, that while we had been running about in Paris wasting our time she had been having a very good season, by which she meant that tips had been good, especially from American visitors, and that she had bought not only a winter hat, but also a fine piece of material and a colleague's silver fox ('The silly girl sold it to pay for her holidays!') which would make a coat with fur on the collar and sleeves.

'So you see I'm all fixed for the winter. I don't need to be afraid of it, and there's no question of my not being elegant, but I must say that neither of you is very inquisitive. You haven't even asked me the colour of the material. Lucky I'm a good sort. You don't need to die of impatience. Bottle green, that's what it is! With bottle green *crêpe de Chine* for the lining.

If you close your eyes you can see right away what sort of effect that will make!’

‘Why, yes, I think it will make an effect,’ said my mother curiously. Emma looked up quickly, not liking the tone of my mother’s voice, but my mother went on innocently: ‘Would you like a cup of coffee?’

‘Oh, no, not now. Thank you all the same. I would be afraid of having to go out in the middle of the sermon. Our dear, good pastor does so let himself go, and when I feel a need there’s no holding me back. You know what I mean? I’d be interested to learn what you have for lunch. People of your sort never think of anything in advance. In Switzerland it’s different, especially in German Switzerland. Nobody can accuse us of improvidence. Lucky you’ve got me! I thought it all out yesterday. Madeleine must go into my room and take the carrier from the arm-chair. There’s an Ostend chicken which will taste pretty good, some tomatoes, a loaf of bread, and a bottle of Chianti. I hope you’ll at least invite me to lunch. There! I’ve just time to open the door for Madeleine and then I must hurry to church.’

When I came back with the provisions my mother was looking very thoughtful, pouring boiling water on the coffee in the percolator. I know by experience she had moods when it was better not to disturb her, and so I simply started to unpack my crushed clothes.

After a few moments my mother said:

‘I suppose it’s time I thought about making you a winter coat. What a pest that Emma is! She’s nice enough in her way, but she’s always spoiling our fun. There’s nothing more hateful than having a person around who is so jolly right. Her tidiness, her cleanliness, all those qualities—what’s the use of them except to show up our faults? Yet I thought there was a saying about nothing venture, nothing have?’

Eleven struck at the church of St. Giles. Doors slammed as cooks, waiters, and *maitre d’hôtels*, for whom Sunday was a day of work, hurried out fastening the belts of their blue overcoats. I needed fresh air. This return home was quite horrible, and I could see written all over my mother’s face her regret we had spent so much money, her fear we might not easily find new work. I exclaimed suddenly:

'I 'd feel better if Nanny were here. I think I 'll run and fetch her.'

'Yes, do,' said my mother.

I ran downstairs and threw myself into the street. All the bells in London seemed to be ringing. St. Patrick's in Soho Square was busy answering St. Anne's in Old Compton Street. Charing Cross Road was littered with shiny cigarette cards showing famous boxers, butterflies, and animals from the zoo.

Celestine was already up when I reached her attic flat. She had her hat on. I wondered if she had slept in it. As she did not offer me a seat and all her chairs were filthy, we remained facing each other, cats passing between our legs, arching their backs against our stockings. I could not see Nanny anywhere. Celestine said very seriously:

'I 'm afraid your cat is a leetle fière, proud, no? I cannot say she is happy. I cannot say she is unhappy. But independent, pas affectueuse. She know you pay her pension. Zat is what makes her fière. When my cats want zeir food, zey make me politesses; not yours. She come, like a lady, to table. You want know where she is? She is on ze roof. If she had been nicer, I would have wanted keep her, so it 's lucky for you. I have spent all ze holidays here. My ladies are all at Biarritz or at Deauville and zeir maids at Ostend. I shall have to wait till Christmas to make money. The maids will catch ze influenza and I shall be asked to take zeir places.

'Don't *you* ever catch flu?'

'I? Zamais! To catch ze influenza, you must see peoples, and I only see cats, and when I take the place of a maid who is ill she is at her own flat looking after herself, and I am alone.'

'And the maid's lady? Don't you see her?'

'Zose sort of ladies don't count. One doesn't vraiment see them. They get up. They go to bed. They work, what? They have no time to lose. Sometimes, ze first day, zey go out of their way a leetle. One has to read the cards. C'est sûr, I talk more when I am here. One is always having to talk to the cats. Would you like me to call your Nanny?'

She took a knife and whetstone and put herself in front of the open window. Nanny arrived in the wake of a large tabby. Though I covered her with kisses she was not particularly



pleased to see me, and made strenuous efforts to return to the slates.

Emma was sitting on my bed listening to my mother telling her about our adventures in Paris. Seeing Nanny in my arms she exclaimed:

'Haven't you got rid of that animal yet? How on earth do you suppose you can be tidy—two people and a cat in a one-room flat, and the cat always having kittens. I tell you, it isn't reasonable.'

Nanny went to my mother, then inspected everything in the room, sneezing because of the pepper on the carpet, jumping up on the table where she curled up on a piece of material, closing her golden eyes, dropping her head between her paws.

Lunch was very gay. The woman in the room next to ours was doing her autumn cleaning. Her broom would crash against the dividing wall and make us jump. Nanny turned her head disdainfully, though this was a neighbour our cat should have been fond of, recognizing her step; for twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, we used to find a tiny package of succulent morsels, pheasant, jugged hare, or shoulder of lamb, outside our door, left there by our neighbour for Nanny.

My mother decided I should lose no time in taking the letter of introduction to the Savoy Hotel.

On Monday morning, simply dressed, I left our house at exactly ten. The air was crisp. Autumn daisies with tall branches of coppery leaves were bunched in rusty tins on stalls in Seven Dials. Canaries in cages and second-hand clothing suspended from hangers decorated the fronts of low, soot-sullied brick houses. Strange cockney faces peered at one in this once dangerous piece of London. My love for this mighty, unhurried town was treacherously driving away memories of our holiday in Paris. My steps were surer here, my affection personal. The vegetable smells and encumbered streets of Covent Garden had become synonymous with my ideas of home. The market porters, a dozen round wicker baskets piled one above the other on their capped heads, bawling out a hopeful winner to their friends, picked a sure-footed way amongst wooden cases of black plums and over-ripe tomatoes some of which, escaping from

their boxes, streaked the road, between the legs of the ponies, like blood. Loving the picturesqueness of the scene, childish in spite of my years, the woman in me shuddered at the thought of slipping with high heels, receiving from the top of some rumbling cart something to stain my carefully brushed costume or new hat worn to impress a potential employer. I crossed the Strand with the smell of onions and pears in my quivering nostrils. Now, in the courtyard of the famous hotel, with the tall, good-looking porters dressed in sky-blue uniforms, the perfumed American women impeccably turned out, their menfolk, spectacled, in light suits, as romantic as in a film, limousines parked outside the florist's shop, my heart thumped. A revolving door admitted me into an atmosphere of central heating and cigar smoke, thick carpets difficult to walk on, and black studded trunks with colourful labels collected during world tours. There was a glass door on my right. Here was the hairdressing shop with its bottles of costly French perfume, electric globes burning with the warmth of amber. The various perfumes escaped from their bottles, mixing headily. My eyes swept the shelves—the 'Quelques Fleurs' of Houbigant in its corpulent, healthy-looking bottle, the 'Heure Bleue' of Guerlain, safe under a little roof, the 'No. 90' of Guerlain, elegantly standing on one leg and a glass stopper in the form of Napoleon's hat, Coty's 'L'Or,' beside their 'Emeraude,' 'L'Origan,' and 'Paris'; the magnificent 'Nuit de Noël' of Caron, and Mme Chanel's precious 'Number Five.' Many others were there also, which I was to note in more detail at a later date. A little higher up I remember admiring the lavender waters and the eaux de Cologne.

The cashier took my letter and like a queen beat her hands for a tiny page dressed in grey with gold buttons who arrived and flew off with the letter as lightly as a butterfly. I had time to examine other things, the powder-puffs of swan's-down, hair-brushes with ivory backs, lipsticks, and eyeblack.

The small page came back and beckoned me to follow him. We passed silently along the thick carpet. A man with rather fine delicate features, grey hair, and a Belgian accent explained that I would have to wait, but not very long because one of the girls was leaving to get married. He gave me a copy of the *Hairdressers' Journal*, telling me to find something else till he was ready for me. He said he would walk with me as far as the Strand.

'So you went to Paris to learn the whole business in a fortnight? Some girls don't even do that. The important thing is to be young and pretty.' He smiled at the cashier, passed a finger over the scent bottles to see if they had been dusted, and gently lifting a curtain pulled out a bowler hat which he kept hidden so that the staff should not know when he went out.

In the Strand he repeated his promise to engage me within the next few weeks, shook me almost affectionately by the hand, and after a quick look over his shoulder, dived down some steps into a tavern.

I hurried delightedly past the Adelphi Theatre to Trafalgar Square, where a professional pigeon charmer had collected a crowd round his untidy person. The misty sun gave a pale wash to the crystal globe above the Coliseum. Great names in music hall were written large. My mother and I occasionally went here to see Little Tich and Lily Morris. In the middle of the traffic rose proudly the Edith Cavell memorial with its stark inscription: 'DAWN 1915,' which sent a warmth of pride up the spines of English people remembering. Flowers were strewn on the stone floor. The noise of the German firing squad was muffled by the continual roar of traffic.

I went on unhurried, full of my youth and belief in the future.

By the first week in October I had already started at the Savoy. Being the youngest I went there very early, putting in two hours at the cash-desk, where I used to browse amongst the perfumes and sew my lingerie. I continued to sleep on my couch under the window, with Nanny or one of her kittens rolled up in the hollow of my neck, and as soon as coffee was ready my mother used to wake me up. I had to dislodge the cat or her kitten and start immediately to put on my stockings, whereupon my furry companion would jump into the couch where it was even warmer and curl up, purring. Soon ears would twitch, nostrils dilate, paws lazily stretch out. My mother, having placed a saucer under the table, the smell of warm milk would come up alluringly. The cats jumped down, and I was free to make the bed.

The postman acted as my clock.

He began at the end of the street, giving a double knock at each door all the way down. When he reached the house before ours I put my hat on, kissed mother and the cats, and pulled open

the door at the very moment he was putting out his hand for the knocker. Thus, instead of pushing the letters between the bottom of the door and the white step he handed them to me, a letter for the cook on the top floor and another in my mother's hand written to Mme Maurer at the Beaujon Hospital in Paris, and returned to sender.

I gave a shout to my mother, so that she should know there was something for her, and ran up. She was bending over the banisters to save me coming right up to our landing. As I handed her the letter I said:

'It looks as if Mme Maurer has left hospital without leaving an address. Obviously she hasn't gone back to Clichy.'

'I don't understand,' said my mother, turning the letter up and down, back and front. Then, peering at a strange hand: 'What's it say here?'

I ran up the last few stairs, took the much-marked envelope, and read:

'Widow Maurer, deceased.'

The next Saturday at one my girl friend, Scotty, and I came home for lunch. We were to go to Richmond that afternoon on top of a bus. As soon as my mother leant out of the window to throw us the front-door key I could see she was upset, but as, during the meal, she said nothing, I did not dare question her in the presence of a third person. She had been making a dress for my companion, who tried it on, but though we both admired it, played with Nanny, and did our best to appear light-hearted, my mother remained sad. I thought she might still be upset about Mme Maurer's death, for this strange woman had been of great influence in our lives. I took Scotty down to Stacey Street, telling her she must go to Richmond by herself, as I could not leave my mother alone in the state she was in.

When I returned to our room I found her ironing. A large tear dropped from her cheek and hit the hot iron, where it was absorbed with a tiny crackling noise. Then another fell, and the same thing happened.

'What *is* the matter, mother?'

'Just a letter from Marie-Thérèse.'

She tossed her head sideways, indicating a large sheet folded in four.

'Does that mean Rolande is worse?'

'No. You can read the letter.'

I took the paper covered with my aunt's childish hand, and read:

'MY DEAR MATILDA,

'I am in despair. The last few days have been really disheartening. The latest operation is to take place on Saturday, the day you will probably receive this letter. Oh, these first days of October when the leaves fall and the children go back to school! Do you remember them at Blois, the shops full of school books and coloured crayons, and the boys and girls wearing their black aprons? Everything smelt so good. The wine shops sold the first wine of the autumn, and then there were bags of fresh walnuts outside the grocers' shops. What an October I shall have this year! The pain has become intolerable. It's not worth while taking aspirin any longer. Nothing makes the slightest difference. I dragged myself as far as Groslay on Sunday to tell Rolande that Louis would be coming alone for a week or two. I've already packed my bag to go to hospital. That will leave me clear to work. I simply must finish all the hats I've started. Have you heard about hats this winter? There'll be lots of feathers, I think, and thick felts in brown and grey, and the cutest dark red. Rolande has become the cleverest needlewoman. She has already made herself a set of lingerie, and her needles are so fine one can hardly believe they are for human hands. She has also made me a nightie in the silk you gave her. I found her very gay, and though she coughed quite a bit she joked all the time with Louis. What weather we are having! But the leaves were falling fast and the gardens were full of chrysanthemums. When we were little girls I remember we did not like chrysanthemums. I went to buy a few things at market this morning, but by the time I came home I was so done in that I had to rest in the porter's lodge. The dear woman helped me up the stairs, pretending she was obliged to go round with the letters. There was nobody in the flat, of course, not at that hour. I drew up a chair by the open window and cried. Yes, I cried because I'm sad and it hurts so. Honestly, Louis is so good. He doesn't deserve a wife with cancer and a daughter with consumption. It's too much for him. I know everything

now. I know, for instance, that nothing will ever do me any good. I wouldn't go through with this new operation if it were not for Rolande and Louis.

'Tell Madeleine to take care of her health. We never take sufficient care of ourselves when we are young women. I shall be at the Laennec Hospital.

'MARIE-THERÈSE.'

My mother did not suggest going to Paris. Though the idea may have passed through her mind she was too economical to spend so much money on a new journey. Mme Maurer's philosophy was not to allow sentiment to put one into debt. We had not forgotten the lesson of my father's coffin.

My mother was also of the opinion that just now my future was taking shape. She wanted to be with me. The Savoy Hotel, with its glittering mirrors, heady perfumes, and American millionaires had an unreal, Arabian night's atmosphere, exciting, but not without danger for a young, exuberant girl. A magic name in the motion picture world offered to groom me in Hollywood. I was to be the star in an important picture. My name would glitter on Broadway. I hesitated; then refused, unwilling to leave London. A distinguished New York publisher, whilst confiding his hands into my care, talked seriously about books. I did not hide my ardent desire to become an authoress. These great men, world-famous figures, were full of interest in the unknown person who sat so humbly at their feet. I began to have a new conception of the American people. Their simple kindly manners and immense generosity and, even more, their eagerness to help somebody else along the path to success found immediate response in my young heart. My mother was quick to sense that herein might lie the explanation of those words so often used by fortune-tellers—that I would become famous. With my pen? It was not yet possible to tell. Our lives were taking a sudden turn like the bend of a river, changing its whole course. Clichy, Mme Maurer, and my Aunt Marguerite, who had once again quarrelled with my mother, belonged to that part of the river we were leaving behind.

My mother went on ironing. By now there were three piles of warm, clean, freshly ironed linen. Nanny sat on each in turn. We stroked her with tears in our eyes.

On Thursday evening I came home rather depressed, having been scolded by M. Adolphe, my Belgian friend, for having misunderstood an order on the telephone. I had not yet realized he was too kind ever to hurt a member of his staff.

I again found my mother in tears. This time she had received a letter from my Uncle Louis, which she silently handed me.

‘MY DEAR MATILDA,

‘As you know, Marie-Thérèse was to go to the Laennec Hospital on Saturday for another operation. On Friday evening, when I came back from work, I found her sitting up in bed, her face all drawn, holding a hat so tightly that I had trouble in taking it away from her. She seemed frozen in this attitude, not lifeless but rigid. I ran out for our doctor. He said it was a stroke. She had gone mad with fear about the operation. We took her immediately to the Laennec, where she died the next morning without ever recovering consciousness. We buried her on Monday, my dear Matilda. I had no time to let you know. You know what it is with cancer. My darling Rolande was too ill to come. The only other person besides myself was dear Rose.

‘I am so very unhappy. Fancy going mad with pain and fear! Each time I shut my eyes I see her with the unfinished hat in her hands. She was a brave little woman. Now, only Rolande is left. . . .’















